

**Ritual Dialogue in Marriage Custom
with special reference to Scotland**

Neill C Martin

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the form and function of ritual dialogue in marriage customs. Particular attention is paid to Scotland, and more precisely the betrothal ceremony or *rèiteach* in Gaelic tradition. Analogues from Brittany and Wales are also examined in detail. The examples from the Celtic tradition are prefaced by a general examination of the role of ritual dialogue in the wider context of Indo- and non-Indo-European tradition. Various elements of the dialogues, and the ritual dramas of which they form a part, are shown to be linked to concepts of the evil eye and to the motif of the 'false' or 'former' bride familiar to European folklorists. Building on the concept of one and two-way thresholds, the dialogues are also shown to be related in structure to other dialogic threshold rituals in Celtic society including seasonal and territorial ritual and those connected to the bardic order. The role of the liminal figure of the matchmaker/bard and the relationship between the ritual dialogic forms presented and dialogic traditions such as flyting and bardic contest is also explored.

I certify that this thesis has been composed by the undersigned, and is my own work.

Neill C Martin

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Introduction

Whilst areas of Celtic-language culture such as tale and song have received much critical attention in the past, the role and purpose of ritual speech has not. Ritual Dialogue in Marriage Custom with special reference to Scotland will examine ritual dialogues which take place in the context of courtship and marriage. The multiple focus is on functional aspects of the ritual, the verbal strategies employed, the cultural role and purpose of the performers and the impact of the ritual on the social and cultural identity of the participants. The overall aim is to contribute to gaps in the ethnographic record with regard to the role and value of dialogic verbal art in Celtic-language society. There is a clear bias toward the tradition in Gaelic Scotland, in particular the betrothal custom of the *rèiteach*, but substantial attention is paid to the traditions of Brittany and Wales. The intention of this comparative analysis is both to illustrate the common nature of the tradition and to build up a more complete picture of the form and function of the ritual than would be possible if attention were given to one Celtic-language culture only. The discussion of the rituals of these cultures is preceded by a more general examination of dialogic verbal art and marriage ritual, making reference to a wide range of international analogues.

Breandán Ó Madagáin's essay 'Functions of Irish Song in the Nineteenth Century' is probably the most substantial study in the functional use of verbal forms in a Celtic-language society. Of particular relevance to our study are his remarks on the multi-functional aspect of song:

the singing of a song never has a single function, but several simultaneously (usually including the aesthetic)... there is danger of distortion in abstracting function from usage and context, as there is also in isolating song from the other elements of folk culture.¹

The study will examine different dimensions of the ritual dialogues and their interactional context, and, in commenting on structural features and other 'abstract' issues, will endeavour not to lose sight of how verbal art is integrated in the community. Indeed, it is hoped that the principal value of this work is in illustrating how a neglected verbal form, while interesting in itself, can reveal much about a society's social organisation and belief system. This broad-based approach would be severely compromised if the subject were approached as a self-contained entity, each dialogue a collection of lexical items.

Ó Madagáin deals with a number of issues which will surface in the course of the present study, one of which is the way in which certain forms could provide a method through which covert information could be communicated, often for purposes of satire or community censure. The skill with which exponents of verbal art use language to convey different levels of meaning is a subject which will be examined in depth. Although he makes no reference to ritual dialogue as such, Ó Madagáin mentions a number of dialogic forms - a flyting exchange, dialogue songs and inter-community singing contests among them - to which, although falling outside our field of close enquiry, we shall make reference to in the course of our discussion. Ó Madagáin notes 'the power of song to transform'; we could paraphrase this as 'the power of *language* to transform', and it is this belief in the potential for language to actually effect change that is most striking in the nature and function of ritual dialogue.² We shall say much on the topic of ritual forms and social cohesion, another of Ó Madagáin's 'functions',³ while also

important is the way in which the community perceived skilled exponents of language. Ó Madagáin speaks of the singers' 'role as community mouthpiece... lifting the humdrum of everyday life to the artistic level, that was the key to their being intensely and personally appreciated'. As we shall see, however, the ritual experts in Gaelic Scotland and Brittany are conceived of rather differently, clearly identified as being of the community, but distinct from it. We shall argue that the liminal, outsider status of the matchmaker-bards was essential to their roles as intermediaries between families. It will also be seen that the role of bard has in more recent centuries fallen on the amateur poet or self-appointed 'master of ceremonies' figure.

Certain kinds of ritual dialogue in Gaelic Scotland have attracted the attention of folklorists, but there are few, if any, critical studies which may be said to reveal their ritual function. A well-known example is the extended dialogue which precedes a shinty match, a lengthy, 'chain' dialogue exchanged between the rival *ceann stoc* 'heads of the family' as the ball is thrown in the air.⁴ Another dialogue forms part of a secular baptismal rite, where the child is held over the threshold and the lay official asks the father of which diseases he wishes it to be free.⁵ A seasonal threshold dialogue is noted by Carmichael as part of the festival of Brigit, while Séamas Ó Catháin reports a similar dialogue from Ireland.⁶ Neither commentator, however, deals with the dialogue or accompanying ritual movement in any depth. Threshold and boundary ritual is central to our discussion, and possible connections between marriage and seasonal ritual will be given attention.⁷ Scholars have rarely given the phenomenon of ritual entry the critical attention it deserves. Trefor Owen is the exception, and his essay 'The Ritual Entry to

the House in Wales' is a good introduction to the tradition there. Owen is, however, rather unsure of the precise nature of this custom, noted in Wales in both seasonal and marriage form; 'there seems to be an early and probably widespread symbolical contest between the sexes... linked with the winter season and weddings'. Elsewhere he notes, 'we are quite clearly here dealing with disparate elements, religious and secular, of considerable antiquity and with a wide geographical distribution, involving light and darkness, male and female, spring and autumn or harvest'.⁸ It is hoped that the following discussion will make a useful contribution to this subject, which is indeed widespread, and is intimately bound up with the elements Owen identifies.

In Gaelic Scotland, attention centres on the betrothal contract of the *rèiteach*. Only one recording of a dialogue exists, courtesy of Morag MacLeod of the School of Scottish Studies, and upon which she bases an essay 'Rèiteach'.⁹ The author's intention is to present evidence of the existence of the tradition, and there is little interpretation of the ritual. Again, it is hoped that this work, to our knowledge the first full-length study of the custom, helps place the *rèiteach* in context. Aside from this recording of an actual dialogue, our discussion is based on recorded evidence from informants who attended betrothals, and from printed sources.

Material from Wales and Brittany is presented in order to build a picture of the common links between verbal and cultural organisation in these three related cultures. The tradition in Wales has been most fully documented by Trefor Owen and Robin Gwyndaf, whose studies are based on accounts from informants as well as from printed accounts. We will also make reference to a variety of other Welsh evidence in print.

The tradition of marriage ritual dialogues in Brittany has been described by several folklorists who had access to informants who could recall certain aspects of the ritual, such as the role of the matchmaker, although the more dramatic elements - the ritual exchange and 'false bride' sequence - would appear to have died out last century. Although somewhat compromised by their reputation as 'improvers', accounts by the early observers Villemarqué and Cambry are examined in depth, since both provide the only extant texts of ritual exchange. It should be noted that a 1989 study by the respected Breton folklorist Donatien Laurent argues for the veracity of much of Villemarqué's evidence, and, given the paucity of available material, the partial rehabilitation of this early collector is a most welcome development.¹⁰ As with the tradition in Wales, Breton commentators have confined themselves to descriptive rather than interpretative examinations, and again, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no in-depth examination of the ritual dialogues or accompanying drama, nor any attempt to place these in the wider context of the Celtic-language culture. Indeed, Trefor Owen states 'the *pwnco* or contest at the door, as far as it is known, was a purely Welsh form', while around 1830 Villemarqué states of the Welsh tradition, 'the customs are now no longer in use for the Welsh, but the principal ceremony, the poetic fight of the bards, still took place there a hundred years ago'. As we shall see, the poetic contest was alive and well somewhat later than Villemarqué's estimate, and the doorstep exchange a more widespread tradition than Owen believes. One of the aims of this study is to provide evidence of the interrelatedness of the traditions and the ritual conceptions which underpin the custom.¹¹ We will also see evidence from Cape Breton and the Isle of

Man. The apparent dearth of material from Ireland is dealt with in a separate chapter.

The study begins, however, with a brief reference to the German *Kiltgang* and Austrian *Gasslgehen* traditions, as an illustration of the way in which verbal art can function as a mechanism in the regulation of courtship and marriage. Several important themes are here developed which will be seen to recur throughout the study. Among these is the suggestion that change in these verbal traditions over time shows a tendency to shift from dialogic to monologic form, this being paralleled by a movement away from a largely improvised custom to one in which learned texts play a greater part, including the integration of material from a variety of different sources. As we shall see, this process appears to result eventually in what may be termed 'mute' customs, where performance of a ritual remains structurally consistent with early accounts, but where the verbal element has disappeared completely. Another theme concerns social organisation, where the potential for conflict between rivals in the context of courtship and marriage is to some extent addressed by the operation of ritual forms. A link between seasonal visiting rites and marriage custom is also shown to be present in these two traditions.

This leads on to a survey of international analogues which, although incidentally illustrating the widespread nature of ritual dialogue in marriage custom, has the specific intention of revealing how these exchanges cluster around particular stages in the ceremonial sequence. No attempt is made to analyse these examples - the aim is to reveal, for the first time, a recurring pattern common to a strikingly diverse range of cultures. In the context of a wedding, ritual speech in dialogic form - sung, chanted or spoken - is concentrated around those events which clearly delineate and advance the

step-by-step process from courtship to marriage. These include the initiation of the courtship, the asking for the bride, the entry to the bride's home, the expression of consent, the discussion and delivery of the dowry, the fetching of the bride on the morning of the wedding, the crossing of barriers and obstacles faced by the wedding party, and the bride's entry to her husband's family home. This is not to say that ritual exchange is present on all these occasions in any one ceremonial sequence. As Van Gennep observes, 'the subcategories of separation - transition - incorporation... are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern'.¹² Dialogue may be absent or present; encouraged or suppressed by law or the church; sacred or profane in character; deadly serious or lightly comic; richly poetic or tersely brutal. In many diverse cultures, however, from Madagascar and Japan to the Scottish Highlands, courtship and various stages of the progress of the wedding rite through its tripartite separation - transition - incorporation structure are marked by ritual exchange in language. The role and community perception of third-party intermediaries is central to the form and function of the rituals under discussion, and the connection between the selection of matchmaker and verbal skill is also first made through presentation of these analogues. A related theme which also emerges is the suggestion that in this context ritual dialogue may also be a 'battle of the sexes', where the male principle must be seen to eventually triumph. This raises interesting questions over the ritual function and identity of the matchmakers, given that the majority of exchanges take place between males. The extent to which these marriage customs may function as rituals of social relation is also demonstrated. These dialogues are often uttered in the presence of

witnesses, and frequently serve to make public the new status of those at the centre of the ritual process, as well as delineating the nature of the new responsibilities and standards of behaviour expected. In this respect there is a quasi-legal, contractual aspect to the ritual dialogues, a theme which is further developed in succeeding chapters. The topic of marriages arranged in the same idiom as a bargain reached in the buying and selling of animals also emerges. The analogues also illustrate certain other features which will be shown to be present in the ritual customs of Celtic-language societies. Of great importance are those which are suggestive of ritual dramatic action, such as the custom of the 'hidden bride', the dramatisation of choosing the bride from among her peers, ritual silence and the enactment of a simulated abduction.

Despite the widespread occurrence of these ritual forms, little scholarly attention has been focused on them. This fact alone goes some way to justifying the inclusion of a broad-based illustrative survey of known traditions. Whilst there has, to our knowledge, been no prior in-depth study of the role of ritual dialogue in the Celtic world on which to draw, the work of ethnologists in other cultures has contributed to or inspired the present study.

Lee Haring's study of Malagasy verbal art reveals the interplay between individual forms of oral poetry, including riddles, proverbs and a contest between poets, the *hainteny*.¹³ A poetic duel, the *kabary*, forms part of marriage negotiations, and Haring's conclusion is that there is an interdependence between these two contest-forms. He shows that the marriage *kabary* is based on the *hainteny*, the essential difference being that the former has harmony and integration as its aim, the latter the establishment

of rank in the hierarchy of the 'men of words'. The agonistic structure is thus consciously adopted as a method of symbolising the drama of human relations taking place between the two conflicting parties for whom the poets act. It will be seen that a similar relationship exists between the dialogic forms in Celtic society. In addition to commenting on the role of bardic contest and hierarchy, this study aims to expand this theme of the conscious adaptation of dialogic forms to a variety of boundary and threshold rituals, including those governing territorial law and seasonal exchange.

Another main theme which emerges in this study is the verbal strategy of employing indirect modes of expression in order to avoid conflict. This is principally seen in the use of allegorical language, but is frequently manifested in formulaic dialogue and in non-verbal methods of communication. In concentrating solely on marriage exchange, one intention of the present study is to reveal and examine different dimensions of the performance of the ritual dialogues, demonstrating as far as possible the ritual and functional conceptions which are revealed through the structure, content and interactional setting. Lacking the extensive recorded dialogues on which Haring bases his study, our necessarily more broad-based approach results in an examination which is less preoccupied with textual variation and linguistic structure, and more with interactional strategies and social structure. Haring describes several dialogues in remarkable detail, but we learn only in general terms about Malagasy society's perception of the symbolic function of the contest, and little of how the contest is integrated with marriage custom, for example with those rituals which, one assumes, precede and follow the exchange. Haring's study is, however, an in-depth and lucid

exercise examining the links between verbal art and the community, as well as the relationship between different ritual verbal forms. The author notes that the marriage exchange amounts to a verbal symbolising of human relations, the aim being to realise an ideal harmony between the two conflicting parties. It will be seen that this is precisely the mechanism found in our sources.

Karin Barber's study of the verbal art of the Yoruba of Nigeria examines the *oriki* chants of women, 'a central component of almost every significant ceremonial in the life of the compound and town'.¹⁴ Barber's effective evocation of the meaning of performance for both exponent and audience is especially relevant to this study in her description of the *rara iyawo*, semi-improvised laments and farewells as the bride leaves to take up residence in her husband's home. In particular, Barber's situation of the chants firmly within the woman's experience helps us to understand 'the duality of the bride, both actor and object'. Also of interest to our study is the sense in which the performers are both individual and idealised, their chants containing both elements specific to their own situation and inherited, the intention being to dramatise the 'last journey' not only of this bride, but of all brides.¹⁵ Barber's study has particular value in reminding the detached scholar of the very real human drama which underpins the event; the lamenting may be mannered, the tears compulsory, but this should not obscure the very real trepidation with which those at the centre of such rituals view this often traumatic event. As we shall see, the community's ritual conception of the bride and groom as conforming to an 'ideal', and the nature of the link between territorial and temporal passage is of key interest.

Examination of the evidence leads to Chapter Six, which deals with the ritual perceptions which underlie such features as boundary and threshold rites and ritual entry. Drawing upon structural analogues from other entry mechanisms in early Celtic society, we arrive at an understanding of how the spatial progression of the figures at the centre of the ritual was perceived. In so doing we develop the notion of one-way and two-way thresholds which govern the ritual process, explaining to some degree the dread of non-completion of rituals, the identification of the house and its penetrable boundaries with the bride's body, the relationship between ritual entry as part of marriage custom, funeral and seasonal rites, and the tradition of the *Cliar Sheanchain*.

Chapter Seven explores links between the *rèiteach* and the tradition of the evil eye. Close examination of the allegorical motifs which the groom's party employ to gain entry are seen to be related to this belief. This raises questions as to how and why the evil eye was invoked in the context of a marriage, as well as providing insights into the use of praise and dispraise of the bride and her female relatives. As a result of the examination, apparently innocent motives such as requests for assistance, offers to buy and sell, references to milk-production and praise may be seen as verbal strategies utilised in order to secure resolution in the handing over of the bride.

In Chapter Eight, connections are made between other dialogic traditions such as flytings and seasonal exchanges. Particular attention is focused on three areas; the extent to which the ritual may be viewed as a 'battle of the sexes'; the role of the bards and audience in bringing a quasi-contractual aspect to the proceedings; and the degree to which the ritual may be said to act as a conscious model in the regulation of conflict.

In a conclusion we argue for the recognition of the role ritual dialogue can play in revealing the enormous complexity which exists in the relationship between a community and the verbal forms and strategies it develops. The enduring impression is of the highly developed, multi-functional, multi-dimensional nature of ritual dialogues, a phenomenon which speaks volumes for the high level of sophistication which characterises the verbal art of those societies at the centre of this study.

It remains the earnest hope of the writer that this thesis may act as a catalyst for much-needed further study in this neglected area.

Notes

1. Breandán Ó Madagáin, 'Functions of Irish Song in the Nineteenth Century' Béaloideas 53 (1985): 215.
2. Ó Madagáin 156, 174, 175.
3. Ó Madagáin 167.
4. See R. C. MacLagan, The Games and Diversions of Argyleshire (FLS 47, 1900) 31.
5. J.L. Campbell, ed. A Collection of Highland Rites and Customs (Folklore Society, 1975) 78. Rev. Walter Gregor, Notes on the Folk-Lore of the North-East of Scotland (London: Elliot Stock, 1881) 11.
6. Carmina Gadelica I 167-68. Séamas Ó Catháin, The Festival of Brigit (Dublin: DBA, 1995) 42.
7. The study Boundaries and Thresholds has been an important source of inspiration for the arguments developed in this discussion. Hilda Ellis Davidson, Boundaries and Thresholds: Papers from a Colloquium of the Katherine Briggs Club (Bath: Thimble, 1993).
8. Trefor M. Owen, 'The Celebration of Candlemas in Wales.' Folklore 84 (1973): 249; 'The Ritual Entry to the House in Wales,' in Venetia Newall, ed., Folklore Studies in the 20th century (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1980) 342.
9. Morag MacLeod, 'Rèiteach.' Tocher 30: 375-99.
10. Donatien Laurent, Aux Sources du Barzaz-Breiz (Douarnenez: Le Chasse-Marée, 1989). In his introduction the author notes that the controversy over authenticity is exacerbated by the value Villemarqué placed on the social and historical worth of his own work. Referring to the discovery in 1964 of three notebooks belonging to Villemarqué, Laurent asserts, however, that these confirm the fieldwork notes to be genuine, 'and not copies made after the fact' (my trans.) In 1975 Laurent completed a doctoral thesis on the first of these *carnets manuscrits*. See also François Marie Luzel, De l'authenticité des chants du Barzaz Breiz de M. de la Villemarqué (Paris: n.p., 1872).
11. Owen, Welsh Folk Customs 167; Villemarqué, 'La Demande en Mariage' from 'Les Chants des Noces', Barzaz-Breiz n.pag.
12. Arnold van Gennep, The Rites of Passage trans. Vizedom and Caffee. (London:

Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) 11.

13. Lee Haring, Verbal Arts in Madagascar: Performance in Historical Perspective (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1992).

14. Karin Barber, I Could Speak Until Tomorrow (Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, Edinburgh: EUP 1991) 1.

15. Barber 112-115.

Chapter One

Step by step: the ritual sequence

I. Courtship, verbal art and the community

The Germanic tradition of the *Kiltgang* involves the use of highly developed, semi-improvised monologues performed by the suitor in an effort to encourage the girl to come to the window of her house, and perhaps even allow him entry. The visits took place with the tacit support of her family and, according to some commentators, these led eventually to marriage. Charivaris were sometimes directed against those girls who refused to respond.¹ Clubs for young men, for example the *Knabenschaften* in Switzerland, organised and laid down rules for other aspects of their lives - meetings and discipline, as well as courtship. Little attention has been paid by folklorists to the verbal component of the custom, and the perception of verbal skill in the community. Was the *Kiltgang* verse dialogue or monologue, improvised or based on pre-existing models? Questions arise as to how seriously it was viewed by the community, and whether it can be said to function as a conscious model in the regulation of courtship. Mainly a spring or harvest custom, it was viewed as one of the direct or indirect steps a boy took toward marriage.² While Swiss evidence suggests that the boys did little more than disguise their voices in some way when they asked for entry, in Austria a young man took the verbal element of his night-visiting very seriously.³ The *Gasslgehen*, a tradition at least three hundred years old, could be carried out individually or in groups. The group form is led by the *Gfrerer* or *gfro(r)na Teifi*, literally 'frozen devil'. The noun *Gfrerer* is used to describe an individual who is *besonders schlagfertig und witzig*, 'quick at repartee', and the 'devil' Ilka Peter explains as *durch vermeintliche Zauberei unverwundbar* 'assumed invulnerable through magic'. In other words, a high level of

verbal skill protected one from evil.⁴ The groups would journey long distances to court girls from other communities, which often resulted in fights with neighbouring 'bachelor clubs'. Younger boys aspired to learn the longest possible *Gasslreime* 'Gassl-rhymes', and teachers, generally elderly men, were highly sought after. Full admittance to the club involved an 'examination', where the aspirant member had to lure a girl to the window with his verses, observed by the others.⁵ The performer would conceal his identity, usually by disguising his voice. The verses themselves are boastful and self-aggrandising, casting the performer in a heroic light. They are essentially monologic in form, and end with a simple request for the girl to show herself. A five-part, metrically-regular structure is employed, progressing through clearly delineated shifts in tone: from boastful and teasing to more gentle praising of the girl, then comic, then insulting, before the final 'reveal yourself' formula. This final stage is often an 'acoustic ending' - an imitation of the mating-call of a bird. This forward movement in stages, so characteristic of the ritual process, can be seen to parallel spatial progression in many of the courtship and marriage rituals discussed below. Here the movement is gradual, from ground level via a plea for the girl to show herself, to the climbing of the ladder, to a seat by the window sill or (rarely) entry to the bedroom itself. As with the related *Kiltgang* tradition, it is part of a larger process; the community clearly views it as the first step in a progression from night-visit to courtship, then perhaps proper betrothal, marriage and the creation of a new family. In a study of marriage in the wider Germanic folk tradition, Zender, however, notes that an early study from Sweden found that the community distinguished two distinct systems of marriage - matchmaking, which took into account the views of the parents, and the *Kiltgang*, where marriage resulted from the 'free choice' of the couple.⁶ Interestingly, the author observes that in the regions of Tyrol and Salzburg, the area from where much of the *Gasslgehen* tradition derives,

he found no evidence for the use of matchmakers.⁷

Also of interest to this study is the use in the *Gasslgehen* tradition of material from other sources, for example medieval lyrics (greeting formulas), folk drama (for example, the character of a 'doctor' from the sword-dance), and lying tales (hence boasting and inversion) which form the basis of many of the rhymes.⁸ The extent to which ritual dialogues are improvised, contain material specific to the performer and his immediate experience and cultural context, or employ formulaic or derivative elements is of critical interest.

In these descriptions of the *Gasslgehen* and the *Kiltgang* generally, the role of the young woman is that of passive auditor, or perhaps observer. The girl would appear to make little or no verbal contribution to the process; creative use of language, the virtuoso display of invective, praise and heroic narrative is the province of the man, who uses these as 'weapons' with which to wear down her defences and so penetrate the surmountable barriers of door and window.

Of particular interest to this study is the much older and rarer exchange form of *Gasslreime*, and the *Fensterstreite*, 'window-quarrels', both traditions which feature true dialogues between the young man and woman. Although no texts survive of the *Fensterstreite*, which derived from the exchange form of the *Gasslreime*, it is known that there was a gradual progression from an amicable to a genuinely ill-wishing exchange - a real quarrel or fight, which 'could only end with the two breaking off relations'.⁹ Whilst the exchange form of *Gasslreime* could also end with ill-feeling, the two traditions are quite separate. Peter defines the exchange form of the rhymes:

They consist of single four-line verses which the boy and the girl make use of according to the situation. As with the other 'Gasslreime' free improvisation or at least variation of the derivative material was common... Sometimes the rhymes of the boy and the girl represented two interlocking pieces, in which a formula A had to be answered

with a formula B... The formula-like contents of these answer-rhymes were mostly discouraging in character; this refusal only conformed to the prescribed custom and was not meant seriously. Quite rightly the boy saw in it an encouragement for further efforts. Sometimes the formula can effectively free the girl from having to give a personal reason for refusal. A boy had to test this [subtle intention] over and over in the actual location!¹⁰

The following example is boastful in character, employs motifs from medieval verse, and ends encouragingly for the boy:

Der Bursch

A schöne gute Nacht,
Drey Rosn auf'n Dach,
Drey Muschkatblühe -
Hast a guete Nacht von mie!

Das Mädchen

Schön Dank! Schön Dank!
Die Nacht ist lang!
Die Stunden sand viel,
Magst köma, wann da will!

[The boy

A very good evening,
Three roses on the roof,
Three muscat blossoms -
Have a good evening from me!

The girl

Many thanks! Many thanks!
The night is long!
It has many hours,
May you come when you want!]

The following example, recorded in 1909, is rather less encouraging:

Der Bursch

Diandl, wann du mi willst hobn,
Muasst aufstiahn,
Muasst zuergiahn,
Muasst ja sogn!

Das Mädchen

Au' steh i nit.
Zuer geh i nit,
Ja sog i nit
Und di mog i nit!

[The boy

Girl if you want me,
 You must get up,
 You must come,
 You must say yes!

The girl

I won't get up,
 I won't come,
 I won't say yes
 And I do not like you!]

The following two examples are girl-answers only, the first from 1800, the second from 1930. Both carry a sexual meaning, and this connection between ritual entry and defloration is one that will be fully explored below.

Geh wöck von mein Fenster, Bue!
 Lass mir an Fried!
 Bin a frische Bösdirn,
 Auf tue i dir nit!

[Go away from my window boy!
 Leave me in peace!
 I am a fresh virgin,
 I won't open for you!]

Geh wöck vun mein Fenster,
 Her au' mit dein Singen,
 Wenn d'der röchte Bua warst,
 Warst schon längst drinnen!

[Go away from my window,
 Stop with your singing,
 If you were a real boy,
 You would be already inside!]

The following example, from the Tyrol (1909), is closer to a nonsense verse, and in later customs merely the chant-like initial words were spoken, the verse having been forgotten:

Der Bursche

Tschipre, tschapre,
 Her über Apre (schneefreie Wiese),
 Her über Stühl' und Bänk',
 Hops über Diendl, heisst's da bei n enk (euch)?

Das Mädchen

Da heisst's nit bei n enk,
 Da heisst's nit bei uns,
 Du herzig schön's Büb'l,
 Du fragst umesunst.

[The boy

Tschipre, tschapre

Coming over the snow-free meadow
 Coming over chair and banks
 Does the girl jump, isn't that said at your house?

The girl

This is not said in your house,
 Nor at our house,
 You sweet little boy [ironic]
 It's pointless your asking.]

In the following example from Kärnten, recorded in 1907, the device of asking on behalf of a third party is employed. On first analysis, this may appear to be an innocuous deceit - but, as we shall see, such face-saving tactics and indirect formulas are very common verbal strategies in ritual speech surrounding courtship and marriage, where the risk of refusal and humiliation is acute.

Bursch

Deandle, magst heirat'n?

Mädchen

Heirat'n möcht i schon, ab'r di net!

Bursch

I pitt a nit für mi, lei für uns'rn Goasspock!

Mädchen

D'r Goasspock war schon recht,
 Ab'r d'r Pittlmann is mar z'schlecht!

[Boy

Girl, do you want to get married?

Girl

I want to get married but not to you!

Boy

I'm not asking on my behalf, only for our billy goat!

Girl

The billy goat is fine
 But the proposer isn't good enough for me!]¹¹

These dialogues, true two-sided exchanges rather than the familiar monologic night-visiting songs common to many cultures, may be related to the ritual dialogues which

accompany the attempt of the suitor or his representative to enter the house of the girl, as detailed in the rituals described below. In these, the prolongation of the refusal of entry, the ritual resistance, is determined by the ability of the suitor or his representative to reply to his adversary, who is standing on the threshold or behind the door or window. The exchange forms one of the many 'tasks' which reveal the features of the ritual process of the suitor's incorporation into the girl's family. It is important to note that, in the traditions above, the boy is judged on his verbal prowess alone; the suitor disguises his voice and appearance and does not reveal his identity.

In Norway, successful night-visiting gave way to an understanding between the young man and the parents of the girl which enabled him to be welcomed unreservedly, and stay overnight without, it appears, having to undergo a formal betrothal ceremony, it sufficing to have the girl's consent:

He had probably not made an agreement with her parents (for this is often put off until one fixes the wedding day and makes all the necessary arrangements for bringing about the marriage) but he was engaged to the girl in the manner prevailing in the countryside, namely that he had won her consent and her parents' goodwill. So, he could, for example, come to the farm on Saturday evenings, share supper with the people of the house, sleep in the girl's arms and so in the morning be treated to coffee etc. This intimate relationship had been going on for some time and, according to the custom of the parish, there was nothing wrong with it.¹²

These courtship rituals and rituals of privileged access are in some way related to the tradition of 'bundling' in Scotland, but the latter custom is normally seen as arising out of necessity caused by the lack of privacy in the home. 'Bundling' is a practical solution to a difficult problem. Young couples could not express their affection publicly by light of day until they were formally united in some way; visits by night, as in the *Kiltgang*, were not only permitted but recognised as necessary; but with the family living in one or two rooms, provision was made for some degree of privacy by

'bundling' the girl; wrapping her in layers of cloth and blankets to preserve her modesty (and reputation) and allowing the boy to lie beside her.

A similar custom *Mukoili-Kon* ('sexual freedom') existed in Japan. The following is part of an account from a Japanese informant, which is occasionally flawed in grammar and spelling:

It was common for parents to make their daughter sleep in the detached room so that men could visit her at night without hesitation. They did took notice whether she had been received a call from men or not rather than whether she had lost virginity...

At the age of puberty, young boys and girls were allowed to join the group called *Wakamonosyudan* after the ceremony of association. It was made up of unmarried young people, so they had to withdraw when they got married, or arrived at the age of thirty. The privilege to the members was the use of the facility which was equipped with about ten sleeping-rooms... young bachelors and spinsters could assemble and become intimate with someone who was likeable because it wasn't restricted on social criterion. If a boy came across the girl after his mind, he made the effort to win her heart with wooing poem. If she accepted it, they disappeared in to the darkness together for making a step towards their relationship. Such pre-nuptial intercourse was called *yobai*... they did *yobai* to ascertain their long-life partner with sincerity. It had never been done for sexual pleasure, and had to be done following... rules.¹³

The rules prohibited multiple partners, the partners of friends and those from other villages, and married women. These *waka*, or courtship poems, formed the basis of the annual festival of *Utagaki*:

So many men and women dressed up, and went out for *utagaki* with cheerful mind. Its main event was holding dialogue with likable opposite sex. The theme of dialogue could be anything. Mostly men asked women, and women answered it... they had to do witty poems. If a woman couldn't answer for it when the dialogue reached climax, she had no choice [but] to be at the mercy of the man. It was the very only day that the door of the love affair with others was open to married women, and a little obscene coitus was allow to be held.¹⁴

We can note from this account the element of discipline and organisation present in the regulation of the behaviour of the unmarried, and particularly the restrictions imposed in order to prevent conflict within the community - the partners of friends and married women are disallowed - and the obligation to mix only with those of the

same village. In the *utagaki*, the verses are based on those used in the courtship ritual. If the woman was defeated, she had to submit to the man. This was a day of licence, where even married women could be conquered by verse. A poem, itself suggestive of a dialogue between two men, emphasises, however, the short-lived nature of such potentially disruptive freedom:

I'm going to have a sex with your wife.
 So, feel free to have a sex with my dear wife.
 But be carefull not to be absorbed in her beauty.
 Because today is the only day that the mountain deity
 could allow us to do so.¹⁵

In France, as Van Gennep points out, the general situation was one of endogamy, with marriage partners being chosen from within the community or parish and from within the same occupational group.¹⁶ Strangers, especially if thought to be courting a local girl, or, worse, marrying one, were on the receiving end of varying degrees of hostility:

If a stranger came into the village to stay, he became the object of very natural suspicion. One greeted him with courtesy, in as much as curiosity was the goal rather than friendship. A stranger - you would note his accent... he wasn't a local boy, where did he come from, what was he looking for here? Why did he leave where he was born? You couldn't know who he was talking about... because of this we called him a *ramaget*, a name given to parti-coloured cattle and those stained with a dye. We never cared too much about the inconveniences related to consanguinity in marriage. One would be energetically opposed to the removal¹⁷ of 'good matches' - that is to say well-off girls - by boys from the neighbouring district. Such a removal would constitute a diminishing of the community... a part of the territory passed to the enemy. Also, to prevent this unfortunate result, one put pride in the hearts of the local boys... it was a motif of blood-feud. In the old days we were like cat and dog with all our neighbours... we despised everything connected to them.¹⁸

In Queyras, Hautes-Alpes, documents from the 13th century to the first quarter of the 19th show that it was forbidden to marry outside the town. In Saint-Chaffrey, the community is composed of three hamlets, where the residents of one were not allowed to marry those of another. In the same region at Celle d'Arviex, the village is

divided into two districts:

the 'good people' and the 'people with a reputation', the latter considered by the former as 'witches', that is, inferior and impure. Marriage was strictly forbidden between the two areas; if a boy or a girl from 'la Belle' married one from 'Renom', they were rejected by their community and considered more or less as pariahs.¹⁹

In such close-knit communities, the avoidance of conflict would be of the utmost importance. Care had to be exercised in who and how one courted, and especially in an approach asking for a girl's hand in marriage. In some areas of rural France, courtship was organised on the same group principles as indicated by the *Kiltgang*. Van Gennep sees the essential function of the custom as providing a means whereby a girl could express a preference for one suitor, allowing the others to drop out. All members of the group involved in night-visiting appear to persist in the fiction that they are all equally favoured; after one of their number is selected, the others retire, pride intact, allowing the favoured member to carry on with the courtship proper. We may assume that boys who attempted to win the favours of girls whilst operating solo would be censured. 'Strangers' would obviously have no choice other than to work alone or through a matchmaker.

Throughout France... is the etiquette which regulates the conduct of suitors during night-visiting. While a girl is unattached, or at least seems so, as often the suitors contrive to keep secret their meeting and their decisions, the young men have the collective right to evaluate her and press their case. As a general rule, they operate in small groups, or in bands of six to ten, going from one house to another to charm the girls who attract them. However, as soon as the girl makes her preference known directly or indirectly, the other competitors leave her in peace to spend her evenings with her official suitor.²⁰

In Lorraine, once the day's work was over, bands of young men would tour the neighbourhood, pausing at houses where there was a clear signal that marriageable girls were inside:

One could tell if there were marriageable girls in a house by the way the dung-heap was turned up: if one noticed it was messy, the suitors

carried on elsewhere: if, on the other hand, the heap was made with care and elegance, they stopped and asked permission to spend the evening... this favour was rarely refused; it was always preceded by the formula *benian si vot*, 'be welcome among us', which was not said until they came into the kitchen.²¹

Of particular note in this example is the use of a verbal formula by the family to welcome their visitors, potential husbands. This also takes place at a specific place within the house itself - the entrance to the kitchen. There is also perhaps a suggestion that there was cultural pressure to agree to their entry. In those rituals to be studied in detail below, great significance is seen to be attached to how and if entry is refused, to the formulas which mark entry, and to the precise location in which these take place, typically at the threshold or window. In Lorraine and Champagne, if the girl's parents were reluctant, the boys could influence the outcome by improvising chants called 'daillements' which were:

more or less rhythmical, which, in principal, began with 'I'll sell you...' and partially constitute declarations of love made up in the street, in front of the window of a house where the night-visiting took place, hence in public, and, in this way, in the same category of those which the young men perform on the night of the 30th and 1st of May. This publicity sometimes has the object of forcing the hand of the girl or her parents in a case where their union is supported by the general community; but occasionally also to ridicule those unions which were regarded as ill-matched, and even to punish by ridicule the conduct of a loose or fickle boy or a girl whose virtue is, or appears to be, fragile.²²

It is interesting to note here that the young men's chant outside is formulated around an offer to sell something to those within. As we shall see, this is a common feature in ritual dialogues connected with courtship and marriage. The importance of public expression, of the presence of witnesses, is also of significance, as is the link between social engineering with the expectation of positive outcome, and charivari (ritualised hostility as part of the machinations of social control). Both customs have the same aim — the regulation of conflict and the assertion of shared values and standards, which amount to a belief in the benefits of homogeneity and the condemnation of

celibacy. Eligible girls were assets held in common, to be distributed in a carefully regulated manner so as to avoid the open expression of rivalry and ill-feeling. Such regulation was sanctioned by the older generation but effected by the young men of the community who themselves were ordered by their own leader and their own, often highly-developed ritual mechanisms. Where there was private agreement between the couple before a more public declaration this too could be expressed in the form of a ritual dialogue, what Van Gennep calls a '*discours stéréotypé*'. The following example is from Dinan, and one notes the necessity of finding someone to accompany the boy when he went to the girl's father to ask for his consent:

In former times, when a boy wanted to know if a girl would consent to marry him, he tapped her on one knee during the night-visiting and said: 'Have you another the same, little slut?' And, if she consents she has to answer: 'Feel and you'll see'. Two days later he has to return and say, 'Do you want to be the mother of my brats?' And again she has to reply 'yes' while blushing. Then one went to look for a companion and eight days later one went to ask her parents.²³

II. Betrothal and matchmaking

Since marriage was considered a matter of the kin-group, parental authority played a major role in the choosing of partners. The 'asking' itself was therefore usually the business of the father of the future bridegroom, or other senior male relatives. Similarly, the girl's father would arrange her marriage, size of dowry and settlement. If he were not alive the duty would fall to the nearest paternal relative.

Where the suitor asked for the girl's hand himself, indirect formulations were often employed in order to provide a face-saving device. In Franconia, Silesia and Westphalia, for example,

When the wooer does not know the girl's parents or if he is uncertain he doesn't get straight to the point but he asks the father, with the farmers' customary diplomacy, in a veiled manner, whether he has an ox or a horse or young filly to sell, or even more poetic and obvious a cow... Therefore, wooing is sometimes called cattle-trading... or hunting.²⁴

Since we may assume the girl's father replied in like terms, this account provides evidence of a ritual allegorical exchange, one of the main functions of which was the desire to avoid conflict. Even in the lowest-risk situation - between two fathers who knew one another - tradition demanded that the request be formulated indirectly. In Veynes, Haute-Alpes, the exchange is blunt:

When an individual wants to marry his son, he says to the father of the girl he has his eye on that 'his billy-goat is chasing his nanny-goat'. If the proposition is acceptable the father answers to leave them be. In the opposite case he assures him that he is quite capable of chasing the billy-goat.²⁵

We will recall that the 'billy-goat' as virile male symbol also featured in the Austrian example above. Van Gennep also notes 'dialogues stéréotypés' connected with betrothal in the Ardennes and Meuse, but gives no examples.²⁶

Parents and daughter would want suitors they knew, or knew of, and must also be prepared for unsuitable as well as promising candidates. Refusals could not be given openly:

In the case of prior agreement between the girl and the boy, or if the girl accepted the parents' choice of partner, the suitor was well received; one offered him a drink, or, more rarely, something to eat. But if the girl did not want the suitor who had been suggested, she could not refuse him directly; tradition dictated certain indirect formulas, certain gestures and symbolic signs.²⁷

The 'signs' noted by numerous folklorists and collected by Van Gennep do not strike one as particularly subtle. The young man, stepping over a mixture of quicklime and water at the threshold, might notice a shovel behind the door - a bad omen. He would enter to find the lamps and candles extinguished, the plates turned face-down. He might throw her his handkerchief, which she would ignore, or she might slip a few grains of oats into his pocket as a symbol of his hopeless mission.²⁸

Van Gennep notes that there has been a general move in France from union effected by matchmakers, then by the fathers of those involved, to the now standard

direct demand by the young man himself.²⁹ 'Low-risk' asking could be done by the suitor himself, but third parties would be brought in if negotiations were likely to be difficult:

If, for example, the family of the young man and that of the girl were of the same profession... there was a chance for the young man to press ahead without too many risks and make his request himself. But if there was a discrepancy in means or in social status, it appears normal that the young man would have recourse to another, to his father, or a trusted relative, or to a professional negotiator to increase his chances of success.³⁰

In some societies, a matchmaker is compulsory. In Japan, 'the presence of a go-between is an essential for the social recognition of the marriage'.³¹ The same was true of China until the Cultural Revolution, when arranged marriages were outlawed.³² Whether carried out by the suitor, father, relative or professional, Van Gennep notes the business-like quality of the exchange, which does not, however, necessarily suggest any tradition of buying and selling wives, but is perhaps conducted in that idiom because of the bargaining necessary in order to decide on the dowry:

The ways of proceeding to the final 'agreement' are, in principal and often in their forms, similar, if not identical, with the stages of bargaining in buying and selling, more especially as an engagement implies from the start both physical union of the two and the practical arrangements that have to be taken into account in advance relating to French property law. In this similarity between matrimonial and economic bargaining one should not, however, presume the former existence of marriage by purchase in France.³³

In the immense majority of cases, according to Van Gennep, the formal request for a girl's hand was made in two stages:

the first executed by a representative in some way verbally skilled, who prepared the ground. The young man, or his father, or one of his near relations, waited to hear the outcome of this preliminary step before being willing to compromise themselves and begin formal discussions of the matter.³⁴

A matchmaker had to be well-informed about the eligible young men and women in

the community. He or she typically would be a central figure whom many families had reason to visit, or who was himself mobile, visiting many homes and so in a good position to report on those of marriageable age and a family's means. In order to conduct what were potentially delicate negotiations, verbal skill was a prerequisite. As expert speakers, matchmakers provided the means for refusal to be communicated both indirectly and tactfully, thus avoiding direct conflict between those who were, in rural society, likely to be mutually dependent. Indirect expression was vital, regardless of whether the young man or his father made the approach themselves or used matchmakers. Speaking of rural France generally, Van Gennep observes:

Whether the formal request was made directly by the young man or his parents, or indirectly in two stages by professional intermediaries or friends of the same age, the rural people's prudence prevented open expression in case of refusal and for fear of personal enmities and enduring ill-feeling. Therefore there was created, in all our provinces, a special language of gestures, symbols and allegories, which could also serve in different circumstances to indicate, for example, the end of a night-visit, or the wish to be rid of a tiresome person, or the refusal to go ahead with bargaining over a deal, but which, in a betrothal, carries the meaning of a magico-religious rite which has all but vanished.³⁵

In Switzerland, official matchmakers, *Heiratsvermittler*, were used, their role also carried out by travelling traders and, occasionally, churchmen. In certain areas these employed the 'special language' outlined by Van Gennep:

The asking of the bride at her home was, in certain parts of the Mittelland heavily ritualised. The 'Wechselreden' [ritual exchanges], common on these occasions, appear intricate, spell-like and were taken from written formulaic examples derived from notaries and teachers. These ritual exchanges are a handed-down cultural commodity and are suggestive of the books of formulas which formed part of the legal literature of the High Middle Ages. Acceptance or (in particular) refusal were often communicated in a symbolic manner. This is what the phrase 'to give someone a basket' meaning 'to refuse a man's offer' refers to (originally a custom where the rejected suitor had a bottomless basket lowered to him from the window).³⁶

In Transylvania,

they show their pleasure in language; a 'word-man' representing the boy has to recite the request in strict and formal terms. In other areas it is the 'Göte' (godfather)..., father or paid mediator, who gets a pair of shoes... a shirt, or long boots [in return]. In certain areas, like Harmersbacher valley in the Schwarzwald [Black Forest] the girl, even if she likes the suitor, has to remain aloof and refuse him twice, only accepting the third time. In the case of refusal he receives a basket... [or] a broom or another shameful sign is planted on his dungpile. Formerly, among the 'Ditmarschen', a shovel was put in front of the door as sign of refusal.³⁷

We have seen the recurrent feature of the linking of formulas employed in 'buying and selling' in courtship rituals of the *Kiltgang*, in France and elsewhere. Ritual dialogue which has the intention of procuring the girl for the representative's party but which is conducted in the idiom of commercial bargaining or some other pretext seems to have been widespread in many European cultures. In Bulgaria, if a young man had no possessions of his own, and was therefore unable to pay the *buba haku* (bride-payment) himself, then he had to abide by his father's choice. His parents played an active role in the betrothal, while the girl's parents were left to 'wait and see':

The norms of morality did not permit that they look for a husband for their daughter... their part in the matchmaking was solely in the achievement of family agreement as to whether they would say 'yes' or 'no'. Sometimes [they] ignored her [the girl's] opinion... more often than not, they insisted on her agreement, which depended on the girl's prior acquaintance with the man. When the prospective bride was from an unknown family or from another village, then an appraisal was needed.³⁸

Marriage between those from the same village was preferable, as more information on the origin and character of the girl was available. It was the matchmakers, mainly male relatives, who carried out this appraisal and made the visit to the girl's home. It was insisted that the visit be paid in secret, 'for there was no way of telling what the answer would be'. Matchmakers 'were supposed to be well-spoken and skilled in matchmaking, to know how to praise the future bride groom and his home; to be

able to convince the girl's parents that they would not be making a mistake if they accepted their proposal'.³⁹ The two matchmakers, *svatovnitsi*, announce their arrival by stamping their feet at the door and knocking on the window. They are each carrying a twig of a cherry or plum tree in leaf, or, in winter, a branch of a pine tree. They do not state their intentions openly, but present themselves as hunters, traders or fellow-farmers, searching for or wishing to buy an animal. The discussion of the girl is thus carried out allegorically:

Dressed as hunters

Matchmaker

People say that you have a falcon hen and our falcon has started flying around her; we have come to catch her if we possibly can.

Father

If you have a hoop and you can catch her, do so. We aren't hiding her. Since she has already started flying far and wide she is no longer ours.

Dressed as fellow-farmers

[Lost Animal]

Matchmaker

We have lost a heifer, we heard that she had come here, and so we've followed to look for her.

Father

It may be here, but let us think it over, seek advice, while you may go for the time being.

[Joining objects] The matchmakers suggest that they join their fence wall or their sheep with the wall or sheep of the girl's family.

[Transplantation] The matchmakers tell the host that he had seen and liked a rose in his courtyard, and asks if he could transplant it into his own garden. The answer was either in the affirmative or a refusal under the pretext that the rose would not take root at the new place.

As Merchants or Buyers

The matchmakers say that they have heard about the goods offered by the host, for example a heifer or a mule, and they would like to buy it. The most common type is the matchmakers' claim that they are in search of a heifer for their young bull, a cow for their ox, a duck for their drake, a goose for their gander, etc.⁴⁰

This is clearly related to the German example given above, where the bridegroom asked the girl's father to sell him an animal, and provides further evidence of a tradition of conducting negotiations in the form of an extended allegory, enabling both acceptance and refusal to be communicated indirectly. Direct formulas could be used, but with care:

When answering the matchmakers, the parents express gratitude for 'the honour' or if they didn't want to give their daughter said she was too young or did not feel like parting with her. They took great care not to offend or hurt the matchmakers sent by the young man's parents because 'Even a gypsy can ask a maiden to marry him; you should not get angry; anyone may ask to take her in marriage and you can decline the offer with a kind word'.⁴¹

Radost gives no examples of non-verbal methods of refusal, but in the north-east of the country the girl's father hides, enabling his wife to tell the matchmakers that she cannot answer without first consulting her husband. Quick assent was not highly regarded, and the matchmakers could make anything from three to twelve visits, continuing to negotiate allegorically. The performance of these rites was 'a matter of duty bequeathed by their fathers and forefathers'. Finally the girl is asked for her consent. Although she has, in most cases, already told her parents she is willing, tradition demands that she express consent in terms of acquiescence to a *fait accompli*. This simultaneously avoids direct acceptance by the girl herself, which may be unseemly, while affirming the importance of parental authority and her position in the new hierarchy.

Father

Why don't we ask the girl and see what she has to say?

Girl

Well, whatever father and mother say... but I agree.⁴²

A successful matchmaking visit, conducted in secret, was followed by the more public *maluk godezh* (small betrothal) held the next day. The future groom did not attend, but the two families met and exchanged kisses and gave presents of flowers, in public acceptance of the match. The date of the wedding might be discussed, as 'fear of gossip and spells cast to separate the young made everyone eager to arrange the marriage quickly'.⁴³ The successful conclusion of this meeting led to an immediate change in status for the couple. The girl was entitled to a new level of respect from other villagers, although restrictions were placed on the girl's behaviour; she was not allowed to go out unaccompanied, nor dance a round dance with unattached men or women.

The *godezh* (big betrothal) followed, held on a Sunday or holiday, and was especially necessary if the period between betrothal and marriage was to be a long one. The young man's entire family was invited, although again he did not attend. The presents exchanged were of greater value, and there were negotiations as to where the wedding would take place. The main business, however, was the discussion of the dowry, which also took place allegorically. The future groom was represented by his father, a relative or a matchmaker. Radost gives only a fragment of the beginning of negotiations:

Boy's father

Well Svate we have seen the heifer and we have approved of her: it is now your turn to say what you would ask for her.

Girl's father

Whatever you give you shall not see it again. Let us see what you would offer.

The boy's father takes out his wallet and places money on the table. The girl's father says 'More, Svate, more!' as the boy's representatives throw coins on the table. When they stop, the girl's father says: 'It is not much, Svate, I'm giving you a heifer as big as a lion'.⁴⁴

Radost points out that the dowry was often established by tradition, and there was therefore no reason to bargain, but any discussion of goods was done allegorically. Between families who knew each other well, there might be no need to negotiate, and the 'small' and 'big' betrothals could be combined. Obviously it was then unnecessary to have multiple visits by the matchmakers. In other words, the less well the two families knew one another, the more complex and highly-developed the ritual. There should, however, be no bargaining about money, 'only a few words exchanged until agreement was reached'. The money given during the ritual dialogue above 'was not a fine, but regarded as a sacred gift... to compensate the mother for all the milk she gave to the girl when young'.⁴⁵ The giving of 'sacred' money also features elsewhere in Europe.⁴⁶ In the Silistra region, after the discussions were concluded, the matchmakers representing the young man 'stood in front of a laden table and answered or fulfilled demands of the hosts. The demands were always presented in the form of riddles'.⁴⁷ If the period between the big betrothal and the wedding was short, then the couple were not permitted to meet, and the girl was not permitted to go out into the street at all.

Door-to-door invitations to the wedding were also made in ritual form by the *kalesari*: 'Greetings from Uncle Gochou and Aunt Stana - [the bridegroom's parents] they invite you tomorrow to a wedding for they are marrying off their 'Toshou' or 'Dana'. The guests answered: 'Thankyou! Long life to those who have sent and those who have brought the news'. The guests then drank a toast to the young couple.

In Poland, as in Bulgaria, the 'lost animal' formula is used. Matchmakers, a man and a woman, accompany the would-be bridegroom to the home of the girl. The door is ajar, they enter, and after some pleasantries the young man asks:

'Isn't there by chance a grey goose here? We have lost one and are looking for her'. The girl's mother, (who is prepared for the visit) answers, - 'Just sit down and eat and drink, and maybe she will be

found afterwards'. The girl meantime is hiding behind the kitchen stove.⁴⁸

After they have eaten a while, the matchmaker suddenly says, 'We are eating and drinking, but we don't know why'. He toasts the young man, saying 'May God give you health', the boy answering 'Drink, and may God be with you'. The matchmaker empties his glass and turns it upside-down on the table. The sound is the cue for the arrival of the young man's parents and their neighbours, who enter, the door having been left ajar. They pretend they have been looking for him and say, 'As our son is always running away from us, there must be something that he likes here, and so as to have no further bother with him, we must leave him with you'. The girl's parents, if they consent, answer, 'If God permits it, we shall not hinder it', and then the girl is asked. She emerges from her hiding-place, covering her face with her arm. She is asked if she is willing; 'She replies, "How should I know?" - this means consent'. The couple and their parents stand in front of the chief matchmaker, the *svat*. He first addresses the boy; 'What do you intend to do? What is your will?' The young man, kneeling before the girl's parents, says 'I ask you for your daughter' and they reply 'It is God's will, take her. Tis not we who will have to live with her'. The matchmaker then addresses each of the parents in turn, asking 'What will you give your daughter (or son)?' The parents answer by enumerating the dowry. Then the details of the wedding are discussed.

There is a second meeting shortly afterwards, the formal betrothal ceremony. It opens with the *svat* chanting both sides of a dialogue, taking first the part of the bride, then the bride's father:

O God, O God from the high heaven, I, a young bride, need the blessing of heaven. Give me the blessing of God himself from the time when I leave my parents' threshold, for, if I have not my parents' blessing, I shall weep bitterly every hour. O God, my God, only God of mine, I must soon leave my whole family.'

- Oh my daughter, my daughter be not sorrowful! Like enough, even in married life, God will not forsake you. Let people talk as they like, if they say ill of the married state, it is because they are unmarried people. It is probably your future husband who is standing here, and now he will give you food your whole life through.⁴⁹

From this account we can note the girl's parents' abdication of responsibility for the entrance of the other family - the door is purposely left ajar, and therefore no entry ritual takes place, but the ritual importance of entry is nevertheless in evidence. They express neither welcome nor hostility, acceptance nor refusal; they neither help nor hinder. The matchmaker co-ordinates the dramatic elements of the ceremony, while direct reference to the outsiders' mission is avoided. The boy and his representatives enter under a pretext, and later claim not to know why they are being given food and drink. The formula 'we are eating... but we don't know why', like the sound of the upturned glass on the table, is the cue for movement to the next stage of the ritual. Both the consent of the girl, and her parents' two-stage consent, are given using indirect formulas which seem to absolve them from taking responsibility for the decision; her parents placing this in the hands of a third party, God, and the girl affecting ignorance. Face-to-face discussion of the dowry is also avoided, with the matchmaker eliciting the details from the parents using another ritual formula. His is also a priest-like function; he invokes blessings upon the pair, and later blesses the rings. Despite the Christian elements of both these and the chanted dialogue, there is no evidence that either he or his fellow matchmaker had any formal connection with the church. The chanted dialogue may also be seen as a ritual of social relations. It functions to outline the necessity of parental consent in choosing a marriage partner, as well as being an affirmation of the state of marriage itself. The fact that the couple are in the process of rising to a higher status in the community, distancing themselves from the lower, unmarried group, is explicitly stated. The voice of the father, however, is still one of caution and ambiguity - the young man remains only

'probably' his daughter's husband. We should also note the importance the girl attaches to the threshold of the house - a further illustration of the significance attached to this liminal area.

In Russia, 'until the revolution of 1917 and even in more recent times, tradition demanded that marriages be arranged by matchmakers'.⁵⁰ The matchmakers, who were expected and prepared for by the girl's family, approached the house of the girl and were greeted as travellers with the formula:

'Are you going far?'
'Only to your house. We heard you had a fine daughter'.

In a later dialogue, a chanted lament marking the arrival of the groom on the wedding morning, the bridesmaid refers again to his party as travellers:

I, young girl, shall take a look
At all the evil strangers.
All of them are unfamiliar.
Unfamiliar wayfarers.
Where are you going young fellows?
What is your destination?
Why have you come here to our house?⁵¹

This may be an example of the 'replaying' of an earlier stage of the ritual, a feature common to many examples studied. Here, the groom's party are treated as if it was their first visit again. On the first meeting when the matchmakers arrive, the bride is not present, having left the house beforehand. After some conversation, the mother goes to fetch her daughter in order to ask her consent. If she refuses, her father 'announces that he will disregard her objections'.⁵² She enters the house but stands by the stove in such a way as to be unseen by the matchmakers, occasionally calling responses to their toasts. She eventually approaches the visitors, with a cover over her head, to drink wine and bring gifts - embroidered towels and belts. These are paid for in cash, then the parting ceremony begins. The matchmakers leave and the girl begins her ritual lamenting. Her laments are in the form of dialogues with

members of her family and friends. The replies are chanted except in the case of her father, who answers in prose. The theme is one of betrayal - her father has given her away to strangers, how can she live with them? The following is a fragment of the remarkably lengthy exchange.

Girl

Unkind people were here.
 And bad people were here.
 And evil strangers were here.
 God be your judge, my father, my provider,
 You have engaged me, your poor little daughter,
 In a strange, far away land.
 I must have, my father my provider,
 Tired and bored you...

Father

Dear child, you did not dishonour or disgrace me. You are a faithful servant and a helpful worker.

To her mother

...
 You went over, my own dear mother,
 You were taken over, my dear lady,
 By the words, by kind words...
 For drinks you gave me away
 To a villain, to strange people,
 To a father and a mother not my own,
 To a stranger whom I do not know.
 Just think, my own dear mother,
 How shall I live, live among strangers.

...

To her brothers

...
 The falcon, my dear brother.
 Poor and wretched, I come up
 To you my dear brother,
 Not one word did you say,
 To our mother, to our father,
 And so, the poor girl, I'm betrothed,
 In a distant foreign land.

...

Reach those foreign, evil people,
 Take away from them all gifts.
 The embroidered pretty towels,
 They were never meant for them,
 They were not prepared for them,
 Not for them meant and prepared,

But for you, my brother dear.

Further exchanges follow between the girl and her sisters, then her girl-friends, her sister again, who then responds in the same chanting style as the betrothed girl. She will tell her sister how to behave 'among villains and strangers'.

Don't expect my dear sister,
 Pork from your father-in-law
 Dresses from your mother-in-law,
 They will only shout like beasts,
 They will only hiss like snakes.
 You yourself, my dear sister,
 Get up early, very early,
 Go to sleep late, very late.
 Ask permission to go out,
 Always tell who is seen through the window
 Do not have too many girl friends.
 Do not ask them any questions.
 Do not tell them of your grief.
 They will gossip to bad people.
 The bad people will be angry,
 And they will be angry with you.
 Better come out dear sister,
 Come out into the open field.
 Fall down to damp earth,
 Lean your head on a hot stone.
 Wash away your grief, your anguish,
 On dear mother, mother damp earth.

...

Girl

Thank you kindly dear sister,
 Grieving girl, you have told me,
 How to live among strange people.

The bride then addresses her brothers again.

...
 Don't refuse my dear brother,
 The request I place before you;
 You set out my dear brother,
 Follow down the road, the road,
 And my brother, bend the road,
 You fence off, fence off the road,
 Down the road set up a fort,
 Down the road dig a ditch,
 And don't build a guelder rose bridge.
 And don't provide a swift boat,

And the villains and the evil strangers,
 Will not pass through, will not walk through.
 And I, young girl, will remain,
 With you, my dear brother,
 If only for one lovely spring,
 If only for one warm summer.

The brother answers

So be it, so be it;
 I am going dear sister,
 I shall close the road,
 And no-one shall pass it,
 Will cross it.⁵³

Several themes to which we shall later make reference are present in this exchange: the building of barriers to prevent the return of the groom's party, which may be based on actual custom; the portrayal of the groom's family as the enemy, and the use of military imagery presenting the marriage as a struggle between two opposing armies; and the use of dialogue to outline the nature of the bride's new state and the social obligations it brings. The groom's victory is expressed both in terms of superior physical strength and verbal skill; the bride's mother was won over 'by words'.

Further sung or chanted exchanges take place on the night before the wedding during the ritual bathing, where the bride is accompanied by a professional wailing-woman; at the later reception for the bride in her house, on the morning of the wedding; on the arrival of the groom in the bride's house to lead her away; and at the groom's house after the ceremony. There are also two exchanges of riddles, one between the best man and the girl's father and between a special riddle-teller and the guests, with a money forfeit for wrong answers.

Riddles feature in the testing of the girl in the matchmaking traditions of Western Tibet:

Matchmakers station themselves in front of the house and engage the bride in a mock-serious riddle-game in which she must demonstrate

by her answers her knowledge of the duties of a housewife. The relatives of the bride give them blows with sticks and kitchen utensils. In the original riddle-contest the matchmakers were struck with switches when they gave incorrect answers.⁵⁴

This contest with forfeits has the familiar ambiguity of the 'mock-serious'. The physical punishment of the matchmakers could be regarded as a concrete expression of the hostility of the bride's family, legitimised in a dramatised play-world. The first meeting may lead to another, more formal meeting in which details of the wedding are finalised, such as who is to be invited and the amount of the dowry.

Among the Vandau of Africa, the girl is asked for using an allegorical motif, in the following case one which corresponds to the 'transplantation' form noted in Bulgaria. This leads to a ritual dialogue, a pattern which will be shown to exist in Celtic-language culture.

When a young man sees a girl he intends to marry he sends an advocate to go the parents of the girl and to talk to them. The advocate sent by him is sometimes his grandmother or his grandfather. When the advocate arrives at the girl's house to introduce the matter, the girl's parents send an advocate as well (who is their speaker). Sometimes the advocates talk the business over in proverbs, for example, 'We are looking for a shadowy place where we may lay down our staff [or stick]'. The representative from the house of the girl might answer: 'The shadow we have is just enough for us. We therefore don't know whether there is any space for others from the neighbourhood. [male representative's reply] - 'We follow the advice of the bird 'Sezwi', which we hear. We understand his speech in this house'. 'Yes, the speech of the bird Sezwi which you heard came from this house but it did not carry far into the distance'. If the advocates from the house of the girl are contented they leave and discuss things with the parents of the girl. If they agree they send the messenger back to inform the messenger who came with the proposal, asking him to fetch the young man so that the girl's parents could see him. After a couple of days, sometimes three, the advocate and the young man arrive... The parents of the girl come to see the young man who is courting their child. If they agree they ask the girl's opinion after she has seen the young man. If the girl dislikes the young man he is refused.⁵⁵

From this account we can note that the indirect formulation enables a refusal to be made by the girl's representative, without direct reference to the subject under

discussion. In addition, both sides make use of the second motif 'a little bird told me'; the male side to provide external justification for their visit, the female side to express further resistance and communicate continuing refusal. This elaborate and complicitous method has the effect of further distancing the families from the potential ill-feeling engendered should negotiations break down. Although a mere fragment, this example, which contains some sexual innuendo, clearly shows the girl's representatives parrying the thrusts of the male visitors, responding spontaneously to their adversaries in a highly-skilled verbal combat. In this confrontation, the many 'voices' of family and community are distilled and concentrated in the multi-layered ambiguities of the ritual experts.

III. Marriage

a. Fetching the bride

The return of the groom's party on the morning of the wedding to lead away the bride is one of the other main stages which occasion ritual dialogue in many examples of betrothal and wedding customs. A common feature is the repetition of elements of the initial visit by the matchmakers or members of the groom's party, amounting to a 'replaying' of those events. As before, entry to the house may be resisted, and some form of verbal contest or exchange takes place on the threshold, or perhaps at the door of the bride's room, between the groom's party and the girl's 'defenders'. The bride is very often concealed, disguised or represented by proxies during this refusal ritual, and she may be handed over once ritual imperatives have been satisfied, or the groom or his representative may have to locate her before this takes place. There may be other mock battles, tasks or forfeits to be negotiated before the groom's party can leave with the bride-to-be. The threat or carrying out of a mock abduction is also a common feature.

One custom amounts to a 're-asking' for the bride using formulas originally employed in the initial negotiations at the betrothal. In Sardinia and Istria, the 'lost animal' formulation is employed on both occasions, and the obtaining of the bride overtly expressed in terms of buying and selling:

the bridegroom or his representative when buying the bride before the wedding or betrothal asks whether or not a dove or a partridge had flown into the house, or a lamb or a white calf had walked in.⁵⁶

In France, according to Van Gennep, the custom of using formulas originally employed in the initial betrothal negotiations is found only sporadically. In the Messin area, where the groom and his father arrive at the bride's house three quarters of an hour before they are due at the church, 'and make the standard demand of the father of the girl as if nothing had been agreed beforehand'.⁵⁷ In the Hautes-Vosges,

the ceremony of the renewing of the demand takes place with a long dialogue, almost reproducing in some ways the proper demand already made before... This re-asking is made not in the house at all, but outside, a few steps from the threshold, in the presence of all the guests gathered in the heart of the farm. It is only after the new acceptance that the father of the fiancé, the fiancé himself and his friends are permitted to enter the house.⁵⁸

In Corsica, it is the father of the girl himself who sets up a barrier on the way to the church and asks his daughter if she has not changed her mind. She must answer 'Je suis aujourd'hui comme j'étais hier' [I am today as I was yesterday].⁵⁹

Whilst the repetition of the 'asking' formula was noted only rarely by Van Gennep, customs of refusing entry, the hidden bride, and the threat or carrying out of a mock abduction were far more widespread. Concerning the last of these, Van Gennep notes 'this rite is found among numerous semi-civilised and civilised peoples... even in France, one distinguishes preferences, and also varying degrees of talent in the scenic arrangement and dramatisation'.⁶⁰ It is clear from his remarks that Van Gennep regards the custom as a form of ritual drama. He gives only one example in any detail, collected by Monnier, which is reproduced here in full. It will

later be seen to be comparable to those collected in Brittany and Scotland.

Before the signing of the contract, an unusual scene takes place among the Bressans: the fiancée, having gathered together several of her female friends at her house, disguises herself with them, and they occupy a separate room. The groom-to-be, accompanied by his companions and brothers, arrives at the house to find it shut. They knock at the door, saying they have come to reclaim a ewe. The reply is that there is definitely no ewe which belongs to them in the house. But they insist energetically, let themselves in and search in every room. Arriving at the door of the girls' room, they knock and repeat their request. Same response as at the first door. In the end, one individual comes out of the bedroom, and, having stated that he had just checked himself and had found no foreign ewe in his flock, inspects the girls one by one. The groom-to-be dances with each of them in turn; and if he fails to recognise the one to whom he is betrothed, it is a subject of great hilarity at his expense for the rest of the evening.⁶¹

Van Gennep states that in most cases in France, the women inside the house are won over by presents, or by speeches in praise of the groom, and predictions for their happiness together.⁶² The house can be strongly barricaded or simply have the windows closed. He lists and maps examples of the 'fiancée cachée' by region, thirteen in all. He notes that a 'dialogue' (presumably a ritualised one) between the two parties is present in five. In Gascogne, on the evening before the wedding, a dialogue forming part of a 'scénario complexe' outlines the presents to be given; in Aulus-les-Bains, there occurs a 'dialogue rythmé'; in the Couserans, an exchange just before midnight on the day before the wedding. In Beaujolais there is a dialogue on the morning of the wedding, followed by a hidden bride episode - whoever finds the bride becomes best man. In Bas-Léonnais, Brittany, there is 'a long dialogue between two "bards", representatives of the two parties, in the form of a contest'. Van Gennep notes the custom elsewhere in Brittany, but without the dialogue.⁶³ He makes no mention of a dialogue in Bresse, but adds 'the fiancée is compared to a lost pullet' a formula which resembles the previous example where the girl was a 'ewe'. As we shall see, this formula is used in the ritual dialogues of Brittany. In the

example from Bressan, the bridegroom's reputation depends upon the correct identification of his bride, one among a group of disguised girls. A related custom is also found in Piémont: 'on the morning of the wedding, when the fiancé goes to look for his bride, after a mock battle, he is offered several women whom he refuses'.⁶⁴ This is also a feature of the rituals of Scotland and Brittany, and is discussed in detail below.

Another analogue is from Zeche near Deutsch-Proben, where a ritual dialogue is followed by a 'false bride' sequence:

The mediator and the best man come with the bridegroom to pick up the bride on the morning of the wedding. In a humorous negotiation with the people in the bride's house, the mediator explains that they were looking for the spouse for the groom: 'We've already chosen a pretty bride for this young man, who is a worthy companion for him, but we lost her. We came to ask whether she is with you'. 'We have many daughters, look around, you might find her'. A search begins. Then an old woman, all wrapped up, is presented to them. 'Is it her?' 'No, God forbid; we don't need an old witch like that'. Then after searching and joking, the true bride, who had hidden herself, is presented. 'Is it her?' 'Yes'. Then there is general joy. The bridegroom is called, who had meanwhile been waiting in front of the house, and the bride is given to him.⁶⁵

In Silesia there is the suggestion of a ritual dialogue between the groom's representative and the bride's father preceding a 'false-bride' episode:

the boy's representative and the bridegroom beg the bride's father for the bride; once speech and counter-speech have been exchanged and a false bride has been brought forward, the bridegroom is presented with the real one. The 'Freiersmann' (representative) delivers a pious speech through which he actually settles the marriage; only then can they leave for church.⁶⁶

Elsewhere in the same region, as the bride weeps at the threshold, 'the bridegroom has to solve three riddles which are posed by someone from inside the house, or he has to recite certain rhymes'.⁶⁷ He then cuts through a chain with a sword; the chain is, however, in two pieces and joined in the middle by pieces of straw, further emphasising the ritual character of the entry.

In Manguilla, a province of Extramadura in Spain, a 'fetching the bride' ritual is acted out as part of a fiesta on the last night of April. Nina Epton notes that this is 'a curious survival of an ancient mock betrothal rite':

a little boy and girl are chosen to represent a 'bride' and her 'groom'. The boy is dressed in his Sunday best by his mother and then he is led, followed by his parents and a crowd of villagers, to the house of the bride but the door remains closed while a dialogue is spoken by two adults, the one inside the bride's house representing a priest. Both parties find fault with the bride and groom but finally a marriage is agreed. Then the door is opened and the two children embrace; the little boy hands his decorated branch to the little girl and the villagers dance in the plaza.⁶⁸

It is of interest that a ritual which was formerly actual folk practice has not only been integrated into a festival, the bride and groom now represented symbolically by children, but also very likely 'Christianised', the role of the 'defender' having been taken over by the local priest. This movement away from solemn ritual to a folk custom performed and prolonged for its 'entertainment value' will be seen to be a recurring pattern.

In Hungary, the occasion was also characterised by a riddle-test:

Occasionally the suitors were only allowed into the bride's house if they were able to answer the riddles put to them. The following account was heard in the village of Sárrétudvari: 'The groomsman arrived at the house and he shouted, 'Well, this young man 'ere has come for his bride-to-be, who lives within'. Which road did you take to get here?' asked the bride's father. 'Which road? Why, the main road!' one of them answered. 'Now, there you see. I told you there's no maiden here! That road doesn't lead this way!' If there was someone among them who knew the answer - road to love - the door was immediately opened and they were let in'.⁶⁹

The custom of refusing a sequence of 'false brides' also existed in Hungary:

One very popular joke played on the suitors in most regions of the country was to change the bride. A veiled old woman was brought in, or a goat, or one of the bridesmaids, and of course the suitors refused every one of them. It was only after performing these planned scenes that the real bride was brought forth.⁷⁰

We will note from this description that the event was 'planned', and that it was regarded as a 'joke'. Certainly, it is the only example collected for this study in which a real animal features as a potential partner.

In Bulgaria, the departure of the groom's party for the girl's house is announced by gunfire, accompanied by military-style music and flags, and 'greatly resembled an army offensive'. They sang:

Lead the army, young standard-bearer,
 Spur your horses, *koum* and *staroiko*,
 For the maiden's courtyard is far away,
 Far, far away across the blue sea!⁷¹

It should be noted that this military-style departure and heroic song were employed even when the couple lived in the same village. In more modern times, the matchmaker went on foot for a local girl, bringing a white horse for her to ride. He would not return on the same road he had taken, as it was believed that the bride would be widowed and return to her parents if he did so. Ambushes and various obstacles lay before them, and 'the matchmakers took out their pistols and rifles and fired them, sang songs as if they were about to start a battle, whipped their horses and jumped over the obstacles. Fist-fights were not infrequent'.⁷² The courtyard gate was found to be 'solidly barred and guarded by the bride's young male relatives... the matchmakers tried to force their way in... the atmosphere was both merry and grave, and some trembled lest the joke should become truth. The obstacles were... designed to try the strength, skill and deftness of the matchmakers'.⁷³ Radost adds 'alongside the cordial welcome, a negative attitude to the arrival of the groom was also in evidence'. In the Veles region the bridegroom and his future brother-in-law had to wrestle. In Dobrojouda, when the groom crossed the entrance, the young men defending the bride hit him with their fists.

When the matchmakers arrived, the bride, hidden in the house, tried to see

her future husband through some object, usually a ring or a sieve, before he saw her. Radost explains the hiding of the bride as being connected with the belief that whichever saw their partner first would live longer, or that he or she would become head of the family. The groom and his supporters went to the bride's room, she welcomed them, and immediately locked herself inside with her brother and bridesmaids. The obstacle of the locked door had to be overcome through force and payment. A ritual dialogue followed, where the groom's party demanded entry and were refused. Those inside answered in a song:

Stop, *dever*, do not strike the door
For the door is not made of iron,
The door is of dried wood,
Dried sycamore wood,
Sycamore wood and laurel.

In other regions, the dialogue was reduced to short ultimatums: 'Open!' - 'Pay!', repeated three times.⁷⁴ The groom enters and tries to stand on the girl's foot as a sign of his future dominance over her. The bride was led out by the *dever* and taken to the matchmakers assembled at a table laden with food. She bows three times at each threshold. In the western part of the country, the groom and the bride were presented together to the matchmakers using a ritual dialogue:

Some of the groom's relatives led the young man by the right hand to the guests saying 'Good Morning, matchmakers! Here I am leading my brother' or 'here I am leading a Sun'. 'May he be hale and hearty!' the guests answered... Then the girl's brother came leading her by the hand; facing the guests he would say: 'Good Morning matchmakers! Here I am leading my sister! or 'Here I am leading a Moon'. 'May she be hale and hearty!' the guests answered.⁷⁵

At this point, the bride, still in a transitional state, was at risk from evil influence and, according to Radost, the threat of abduction. In the Kyustendil region a special ritual figure, the *strashnik*, emerged. Usually an uncle of the bride, everything he wore was inverted and reversed, and his appearance was such that he 'attracted the gaze of all present, and in this way warded off possible evil spells against the dressed up and

trimmed girl'.⁷⁶ The connection between the tradition of the evil-eye and marriage in Highland Scotland is dealt with in detail below.

In the north west of Bulgaria, before the bride is led away, there is a ritual dialogue between the girl's father and the couple, before he gives them his blessing. It takes place over the dowry-chest, on which ritual bread has been placed:

The young couple stood on either side of the chest holding the bread in their right hands. The father addressed his daughter asking her: 'What is this?' - 'Salt and bread' - the daughter answered. Then he turned to his son-in-law and asked the same: 'What is this?' and he answered 'Salt and bread'. Then the father made the sign of the cross and blessed the bride and bridegroom.⁷⁷

Wailing and ritual weeping, notes Radost, were 'an obligation' and used 'a melody resembling the dirges at a funeral'. The girl stopped at the gate and bowed three times to the house before finally leaving. The obligatory weeping of the bride is noted by many commentators.⁷⁸

We may note from the above description the identification of the groom's party with an army, the groom as the heroic figure at its head, setting out on a long journey to a far-off land to claim, one might say, their prize, and bring it home. Their reception is ambiguous, both hostile and welcoming, and this finds agonistic expression in both words and action, with the bride hidden and an entry ritual dialogue at the bedroom door. The couple are explicitly identified with the sun and moon during their ritual presentation to the assembled guests, and the bride protected from evil by the presence of a ritual figure who represents an inverted, upside-down world.

In Russia, the groom's party assemble in the courtyard of the girl's house. They are described in the girls' welcoming song as 'noblemen' and the bride encouraged to make gifts - embroidered towels - as she did previously on the arrival of the matchmakers. The bride is hidden and impersonated by her bridesmaid, who is

wearing the bride's dress and veil and is accompanied by a wailing woman. She affects not to recognise the 'travellers', nor how they came to be there. As with the first entry ritual, she denies responsibility for opening the door:

The doors opened by themselves
Doors were standing on pivots.⁷⁹

The best man opens the door but does not enter. The bridesmaid continues:

...
I, young girl, shall take a look
At all the evil strangers.
All of them are unfamiliar.
Unfamiliar wayfarers.
Where are you going young fellow?
What is your destination?
Why have you come here to our house?
I am a pretty girl
And my father does pity me;
He shall refuse you, good fellows.

Then she chants 'from the threshold I'd turn back' as the best man tries to enter, the substitute barring his way. Alexander notes that this is repeated up to three times. The best man knocks on the bar of the door and there follows a riddle-like exchange, spoken, between the father of the bride and the best man:

Father
Why is the iron bar shaking?

Best Man
'The iron bar is shaking,
Because the best man is making a lot of noise'.

Father
What are you standing on?

Best Man
'Socks'.

What are your socks on?

'Innersoles'.

What are your innersoles on?

'Outersoles'.

What are your outsoles on?

'Planks'.

What are the planks on?

'On cross-beams'.

What are the cross-beams on?

'Pillars'.

What are the pillars on?

'Land'.

What is the land on?

'On a disc'.

What is the disc on?

'On water'.

What is the water on?

'On a whale'.

What is the whale on?

'On God's amen'.

The father says 'Amen' and opens the door. The groom's party enter the house. Another verbal trial awaits them; in order to be given a seat, the best man and his guests have to answer questions asked by a 'special riddle-teller.' A forfeit must be paid for each incorrect answer. It should be noted that the groom is not involved in any of this verbal jousting - his representatives battle on his behalf. The opening riddles are again concerned with the entry to the house, this time with the character of a journey to a mythical, heaven-like otherworld, with the groom as conquering hero:

Riddler

Good fellows, how did you arrive here and how did you get into see



us? Our father had a huge gate built reaching from the earth to the sky. Neither by horse nor on foot could anyone get by. How did you get through?

Best Man

Our young prince took axes, hatchets and saws. With the axe he broke the gate up, with the hatchet hacked it up, and with the saws sawed it up. And then we rode on.

Riddler

Our father had a goat with gold horns on the road. She did not let anyone by, but attacked them all. How did you get past her?

The best man puts down money

Riddler

Our young princess turned into a pike and went off to sea. How could we get her?

Best Man

Our young prince had a grandmother and a great-grandmother who spun and wove and made fishing-nets. Our young prince went fishing and caught this pike in his net.

He points to the bride.

Riddler

Give us a monk in a white shirt

Best man gives them wine in a bottle.

Give us the blue sea with white swans.

Best man gives them beer and pastry.

Let me have what is more beautiful than the beautiful sun and bright moon, what is dearer than a father and mother.

Best man gives him an icon.

Let me have a gold staff⁸⁰ so that our bride, the young princess, will have something to lean on.

Then the best man presents the groom and says 'here is your golden staff'. The riddling exchange continues, then the best man is asked for 'a veil so she'll have something to wear'. The groom takes out a kerchief and veils the bride. All are seated at the table, the groom taking his place beside the bride. They eat, and after

the third dish, it is the best man's turn to ask riddles of the bride's family.⁸¹

In the Bihar region of India, the bridegroom walks towards the bridal chamber, with the bride following. Her sister is standing at the door and as the boy arrives, 'she sings a song to bar his entry until he sings a song of love', a *gajal*:

I will not let you cross the threshold,
Son-in-law,
For you've had your mother
And you've slept with your sister.

While the bridegroom is struggling with a *gajal* the women tease him:

If his father can read
He'll read one out,
If his father's a drummer
He'll beat a drum
If his father can't read
He'll push his way in.

At last the *gajal* is sung to the girl's satisfaction, the door is opened, and the pair go in.⁸² Another example shows that gifts were also demanded:

The couple then leave the courtyard and go into the house where the family deity is put. This house is called *kohbar*. At the door they are stopped by the sister of the bride, who requires the bridegroom to repeat certain verses. The bridegroom demands a present for doing so, and on this being given he repeats the verses. More usually in Northern India the married pair are stopped at the door of the house of the bridegroom by his sister or some other near female relative, who will not permit them to enter until she receives a gratuity.⁸³

In Mongolia, it is a combination of the verbal skill and gifts, some magical, of the intermediaries which breaks down the defences on the wedding day. This account includes a verbal exchange between one representing the bride and the other the groom. It is to be noted that these appear to be female intermediaries, attempting to wear down the defences of other women. These customs may centre on the solidarity of women and the expression of ritual resistance at the diminution of their number by marriage. If so, perhaps a female negotiator is a shrewd choice:

At the gate of the bride's house, her niece and two ladies were waiting for the bridegroom. When he tried to enter, these ladies pretended to refuse him. Then he began to exhibit silk (called 'hatatta' in Mongolian), sake, and meat which had been preparing beforehand, and the person (called 'Horumochin') made her appearance. She was the chosen person because of her honey tongue. She began to give those ladies all sorts of flowerly words like 'we brought you enough sake and meat, let's have a drink! Don't get sulky! It mars your beauty! Because of the effect of these compliment, the ladies allowed them to enter at last. On the other hand when the party of the bride's tried to enter, the brother and nephew of the bridegroom's pretended to refuse her, then another dialogue [was] held like this:

Horumochin (bridegroom's side)

[The] deity of gate won't allow you to enter without offerings.

Horumochin (bride's side)

Look at this snuff case which I'm holding in my hand. The person who picked it up, if he is blind, it will give him sight, if he is bald, he will have a full head of hair, if he is crippled, he will have a sound body.⁸⁴

Then the snuff-box was thrown into the air and the bride could enter. My informant points out this dialogue was not particularly unusual, even general at weddings.

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the bride chants laments and farewells, her *rara iyawo*, semi-improvised verses to named hearers as she leaves to take up residence in her husband's home, a tradition comparable to that of the Russian bride noted above. These chants are accompanied by a sympathetic chorus provided by her female supporters, and as a result 'sometimes the performance develops into a dialogue where the chorus has almost as much to say as the bride'. This dialogic form was also present at funerals. The bride's day, however, is known as the *faaji iyawo*, the 'bride's enjoyment':

Solo

Duduyemi [Blackness-Suits-Me], dark as the threatening rain.
On this day I see my mother -
May good luck attend me today.

Chorus

On this day the chorus supports you resoundingly
The chorus raises up your song on high
It's the chorus that holds sway today

This day the chorus supports you resoundingly
 May good luck attend me today.
 On this day, do not forget us
 My dear playmate
 My dear playmate, do not forget us
 May good luck attend us today.

Solo

How could I forget you?
 What you and I said to each other
 Was not said to be forgotten
 My companion, how could I forget you?
 May good luck attend me today.

Chorus

...
 When we are calling you
 My playmate, you don't respond.
 May good luck attend me today.

Accompanied by an escort of young girls, she goes first to her own parents within the compound and kneels ceremoniously in front of them. She chants verses expressing her gratitude to them for all they have done; her regret at leaving; her respect and affection for them. Tears sometimes stream down the bride's face as she does this. She will add... her father's and mother's lineages. Her parents give her their blessing and she moves on to other senior members of the compound, repeating the performance for each in turn.⁸⁵

As well as gratefulness and anxiety, her verses outline the breaking off of relations with unmarried women, and of casual relations with men:

I've left the stage of 'Come in this evening'
 I've left the stage of 'Drop in on your way back'
 I've joined the club of mothers of new-born babies
 Mother of a new-born baby that is a boy
 May good luck attend me today.⁸⁶

A certain ambiguity in her day of 'enjoyment' is perceptible, just as the Russian bride adopted an accusatory tone to speak of her betrayal to the 'strangers'. Other common features are her denying any knowledge or control over her situation, and the emphasis placed on her solitude:

They're making arrangements about the ram
 The ram is grazing in the yard
 When I was not in the house

'Laughing-teeth', they made arrangements about me
 They plotted and planned
 Plotted and planned until they got the date-fixing fee
 Got the date-fixing fee, but the rest is left to me alone
 May good luck attend me today.⁸⁷

Although her performance is based upon an existing model, 'the young bride is not in fact merely memorising ready-made chunks of material: she has become accustomed to the style, form and content of *rara iyawo* through many years of participation in other girls' ceremonies before she settles down to prepare intensively for her own wedding day'.⁸⁸ Her performance is obligatory, and although she may learn passages from a recognised expert, she is obliged to include material specific to her own experience, and this leads to different degrees of fixity in her performance. If confident 'she would begin to use her materials more freely... she would introduce variations, surprises, interruptions and idiosyncratic passages of her own'.⁸⁹ Indeed, according to one observer, if two brides met on their wedding days they would sometimes engage in chanting contests, suggesting that a basic ability to improvise verses was a common skill, since it is hardly credible that a bride would memorise passages in anticipation of such an unlikely event.⁹⁰ As Barber points out, 'she has many other things on her mind than poetry'.⁹¹ In such a tradition, claims the author, the distinction between memorisation and improvisation is not useful:

the whole continuum... [between memorisation and improvisation] is actually occupied by varying versions of this, some leaning toward repetition of fixed passages, others towards free creative variation within the parameters of the given performance style. What is central to all variants is habituation: that is, that performance is picked up through practice rather than produced through the operation of consciously mastered rules.⁹²

This is a reading which will be usefully applied to the examples of ritual dialogue from the Celtic world; as we shall see, while fixed elements exist, and a bardic class are recognised as the most skilled exponents, their formal, ceremonial performance is

at one end of a continuum, while a modern, casual 'free for all' lies at the other.

The Yoruba tradition also exhibits elements common elsewhere; the solidarity of the womenfolk; the suggestion of allegory, the 'ram' representing the groom; the scrupulous incorporation of the immediate community; the involvement of the ancestors in the occasion, with the poetry used as the main conduit to the departed relatives. Also of note is an element of inversion. Until this point in the proceedings, the male side had made a series of respectful visits to the girl's family - the *isihun* ceremony for 'opening discussions' and the *parapo* for 'uniting people' in addition to visits from matchmakers and yearly voluntary labour by the groom-to-be:

The man and his people had to show that they were serious about the marriage; that they recognised the importance of the family they wanted to ally with; that they knew every member of this family, however extensive; and that they were grateful for being allowed to marry one of its daughters. The girl, esconced in the heart of her people, was the prize for which the man's family had come to beg.⁹³

The entry of the bride to her transitional state is, as Barber points out, 'a complementary inversion of the first movement', again illustrating the pattern of inversion and reversal common to many traditions.

Malagasy tradition offers another example of the distillation of conflicting voices into a two-sided dramatic verbal contest between representatives of both sides. On one level the marriage *kabary* is a poetic duel between the two contestants, the *mpangataka* ('petitioner') for the groom's family and the *mpanatitra* ('deliverer') for the bride's family, 'in which debaters exchange measured, fixed phrases and stanzas in an attempt to best each other... it is a formidable representation of how to carry on a serious, formal interrogation'. On another level,

the drama attempts to realize an ideal harmony and integration between conflicting parties. That harmony exists mainly in the discourse it creates. The opposed interests of the parties... their inevitable anxieties over losing a daughter and rearranging land rights can be allayed only by the power of the word.⁹⁴

As Lee Haring points out, 'the real marriage arrangements have been made 'off-stage' and what takes place is 'the symbolism of a drama including plot, principal and supporting roles, fixed dialogue, narrative and lyric'. The bridegroom's hired orator seeks to both control the debate and to reconcile the two families, his fundamental question 'will you give up this girl to us?' answered in oratory and the delivering of the bride.⁹⁵ The *kabary* is 'assembled out of existing materials on the models provided by the riddle and the proverb', and therefore makes extensive use of indirect metaphorical language. On the attendant ambiguities and plurisignation Haring observes;

A brief allusion can refer to something external of the words, the words can refer to a symbolic significance behind their manifest meaning, or the terms of a verbal message can possess several different or even opposed semantic values. In Highland Madagascar... verbal artistry... makes constant allusions to proverbs and folktales, and relies continually on metaphor for the sake of dissimulation or obscuring another meaning.
...it becomes a means of simultaneously hiding and revealing thought so as to convey delicate and dangerous matters.⁹⁶

The context and structure of the *kabary* is worthy of description, as it resembles in many ways the performance situation and format of the Celtic dialogues examined below.

With the marriage arrangements already decided in private after discussion using literal language, the two spokesmen meet for the contest at an appointed place and time, where a considerable audience is assembled. For the bride, the 'separation' part of the ritual has already begun, and she is unseen, but not absent from the proceedings. The groom is present, but silent. He and his *mpangataka* are accompanied by an odd number of *mpaka* ('takers') the odd number made even for the return journey by the addition of the bride. The contest may even take place in the open air, 'to satisfy the crowd's curiosity'. The 'petitioner' begins with a formal apology for his lack of skill, ending in a salutation to all assembled. He then names

the hierarchy of the groom's ancestors, through metaphors connected to the natural environment, which leads to the use of proverbial comparisons 'to deny the separation of the two families'. These include 'birds flying together', 'guinea fowl nursing together', 'cattle grazing together' and 'fish swimming in the same water'.⁹⁷ He must also give the girl's genealogy accurately, or face censure or even a refusal of his demand. Although this information is known to both sides, 'it must now be publicly stated in formal dialogue... [this] assures both families that none of the groom's ancestors are among them, which would make the marriage incestuous, and that the marriage will unite groups of comparable rank'.⁹⁸ The names of the bride and groom must also be stated correctly; failure to do so may produce the reply 'we have several daughters here' or 'you have several boys in your family, and we do not know which is the one'. His proposal must be carefully framed so as to address the bride's kinsmen and not the absent bride herself. His opponent pleads the girl's youth and inexperience with a metaphor; she is a 'spade handle leaning against a pillar'.⁹⁹ They may also exchange insults,¹⁰⁰ a feature of customs elsewhere in Africa; Lucy Mair describes the 'fetching of the bride' custom among the Gusii of Kenya:

At her home the husband would be met outside the house by his wife and her friends, shrieking obscenities and taunting him with sexual inadequacy; no one could stop them, and they went on as long as they liked... the exchange of insults was confined to women, and the bridegroom was the only man to be directly insulted.¹⁰¹

Towards the end of the Malagasy drama the bride appears, entering silently and 'symbolizes her delivery by taking a place next to the groom at the north hearth'.¹⁰² The ritual is concluded with the handing over of the *vodiondry*, 'nominally a sheep's right leg with the tail, actually a small sum of money symbolising it'.¹⁰³ As we shall see, this 'handing over' of the bride, and several other features of the Malagasy tradition, resemble the rituals observed in Celtic society.

Haring points out that in modern times there has been a movement from dialogue between two verbally-skilled relatives, to contest between hired intermediaries, and now to monologue:

Nowadays the debate will often have lost one of its contestants. The solo performer, spokesman for the groom's family, may be a professional speaker instead of a relative. The convergence of Malagasy and European cultures, as well as the influence of print, has tended to transform *kabary* from an improvisatory art into a recitation... Still, even a hired man of words is perceived as powerful, especially if he possesses variable techniques, strategies, and tactics of negotiation. The petitioner in Imerina today may perform no more than a few sections of the oration as prescribed - an apology for speaking... an excuse, an array of proverbs - and then proceed to ask for the young woman. Even these few sections are really a dialogue of contestation. As the speech proceeds, the girl's family continually interrupt the speechmaker, challenging him to give proof of his assertions, objecting to what he says, and making offensive remarks about the groom and his family. The speechmaker, for his part, must listen and approve all this without losing his temper and must even thank the interrupters for their remarks. Heckling the speechmaker, the bride's family is carrying on the traditional function of the deliverer. It is her family who constitutes his real antagonist because it speaks for the conflicting interests of the parties.¹⁰⁴

It is of interest that the *kabary* debate is modelled on a pre-existing dialogic verbal form *hainteny*, a true verbal contest between skilled exponents. Although the unofficial intention of the *kabary* duel is to win the contest, each side or speaker claiming greater authority, the performers simultaneously seek to bring about interdependence, dramatically asserting their *own* interdependence through the contest, and so denying any conflict of interest. Their eventual individual reconciliation corresponds to the end of disorder and beginning of union and harmony between the two families. The ideal result is a draw, but such rituals have a fixed outcome; the groom's side will triumph and lead away the bride, assuming that they have not inadvertently insulted their former adversaries. The petitioners' submission to the testing and obstructiveness of the girl's family, temporarily dominant, results in its inversion; the groom's party regain dominance after a period

of inferiority. Reciprocal exchanges of gifts further complicate the picture; symmetry and equality are in flux as notions of worth and honour are played out publicly. As Haring observes, 'the Merina marriage debate creates in words a solidarity not created by redistributing material and personal resources'; anxieties are dissipated, honour satisfied and cosmos emerges from chaos.¹⁰⁵ Despite the individual contestatory effort, the duel is not a real contest, rather a dramatising of the oppositions of submission and dominance, dialogue and monologue, and the conflict inherent in the arranging of a marriage in patrilineal societies. The groom may be an 'outsider' when he visits her family, but it is the woman who must live her life as permanent 'alien' among her husband's people. Haring remarks 'was there ever a time when the public performance governed the union? It seems doubtful'.¹⁰⁶ Marriage rituals have at their centre both conflict and reconciliation; equilibrium is brought about by the power of the word.

b. Delivering the bride

The ceremony of the incorporation of the new bride into the home of her husband is another of the stages in the ritual sequence which occasions dialogue. As the Russian bride's lament outlined, she must obey her new mother-in-law, live with the 'strangers' and work diligently as a new 'daughter' in their household. These dialogues may be said to function to delineate the nature of her new roles, and the new terms of address, as well as amounting to a contract to work uttered in the presence of witnesses - a ritual of social relations. The following example is from Piémont:

henceforth she will humbly call her [the mother-in-law] *mare madona*... woe on the girl the mother-in-law receives sullenly; blessed the one who is hugged heartily. Formerly this encounter between the *mare madona* and the daughter-in-law took place with greater solemnity. When the procession arrived at the house (of the parents)

of the groom, they found the door closed. The bride knocked on it three times. On the third knock the door was opened and on the threshold the mother-in-law was planted, a scowl on her face and a ladle hanging from her waist-band. Then the following dialogue began between the two women:

- What do you want?
- To enter your house and obey your every command.
- Aye, you outsider girls, fickle and capricious, you are sure to have other things on your mind other than the running of the house.
- Let me try and I'll show you!
- In this place, it's a matter of leading into the field and feeding the animals, of cutting the hay and ploughing the fields.
- I too will lead to pasture and feed the animals, and I will cut the hay and plough the fields.
- In this place, you have to do something more; it is expected that you get up first and go to bed last.
- And that I'll do too.
- But you'll waste away with so much toil.
- God and your son will help me.¹⁰⁷

In Fours, Hautes-Alpes, there is a ritual dialogue between the bride's party and the representatives of the groom at the bridegroom's home, when the bride is brought to be handed over as a new 'daughter' to her mother-in-law.

They set out for the married couple's house, where the door was found to be closed. The one who was leading the bride knocked and the person inside the house asked 'Who's there? They are, replied the first, tired travellers looking for lodgings'. He was told that the door could not be opened, because they were waiting for a new mistress of the house. Then another member of the procession, taking over, announced the arrival of the young bride and the door opened immediately.¹⁰⁸

This could be a 'replaying' of an earlier ritual entry or simply a utilisation of stock elements for the ritual deemed most 'crucial' to the whole sequence. In Cunéo, the ceremony is rather more one-sided:

The bride presented herself to the mother-in-law and said three times: 'mother I have come to work for you', to which the mother-in-law replied with an expression of welcome, embracing her and accompanying her for an inspection of the bridal chamber.¹⁰⁹

In the region of Alba, it is the matchmaker who calls upon the mother-in-law to accept her new daughter:

in front of the bride the *baciale* (matchmaker) first appeared; he called loudly to the lady of the house saying: 'Come outside mother, because I have brought you a young woman'; the mother-in-law appears on the threshold, and smiling, greets the bride, invites her in, assures her that she wants as much happiness for the bride as for her own daughters, and embraces her. This kiss, to clearly distinguish it from all others, is called 'the kiss of Judas'.¹¹⁰

In Bavaria, as the bride enters the house, she chants the following rhyme 'Ich greif über das Ueberthür, mein Krieg geh alweg für!' ['I reach for the lintel and therefore my war is over']. Her husband replies, in a harsh, unconcerned way (*derb*) 'Ich greif an die Wend, ich schlag dir den Ruck und die Lend' ['I reach for the lintel and I will beat you on back and hip']. The repetition of 'über', literally 'I reach over the door' emphasises the moment of transition. The noun 'Lend' can mean 'loin' as well as 'hip', introducing a sexual meaning to the threat of 'control'. In Vagtland she extends her feet towards the threshold saying 'Ich stehe oben und unten an, ich bin der Herr und nicht der Mann!'; ['I resist up and down, I am lord and not the man!'] which may be an example of ritual inversion. Elsewhere the door is locked and only opened after a rhyme or blessing is spoken.¹¹¹

In Bulgaria, the arrival of the matchmakers and the bride at the home of the bridegroom is announced by the 'singing girls', inviting the groom's mother to come out and welcome them:

Open the gates, bridegroom's mother
For coming hither is a soldier with a heavy wedding
Three hundred horsemen two hundred infantrymen
Two suns are shining in the bridegroom's courtyard
Two mists are spreading over the bride's courtyard.

Come out, mother of a valiant man
To see what a falcon is flying
And following in his wake a black-eyed partridge
A fine field partridge
Both seeking a tree to make a nest.

By the end of the song the matchmakers had already entered the courtyard. The couple walk along a red thread stretched from the threshold, putting their right feet

first. A ritual dialogue takes place between the assembled crowd and the groom:

'What are you collecting, son-in-law?'
'I am gathering together a home and a house'.¹¹²

In the Samokov region, there is dialogue at the threshold which may be a 'replaying' of the earlier example when the bride left her home:

Her mother in law waited for her inside the threshold holding a loaf of bread with a bowl of salt on top of it in her hands and asked her 'What is this, daughter in law?' 'Salt and bread, mother' the bride answered. This was repeated three times and then they entered the house... this put an end to the *goveene*, the ritual silence kept by the bride in the presence of the bridegroom's parents. In the past the bride kept the silence up to the fortieth day after the wedding.¹¹³

The newly-weds then entered the house, right feet first. The bachelors tapped the groom 'so that he might beget strong sons'. The mother-in-law led the bride to the fireplace, and they circle it three times before the bride stirred the fire with a poker.

In Russia, at the groom's home, the bride's friends sing a dialogue song which serves to outline her new status; she is in a new home, and must submit to a new authority, that of her husband:

Tell me, Mary, whom do you love in this house?
'I love my dear father in this house.'
That, Mary Mikhailovna, is not so, is not so.
That, Mikhailovna, is not true, is not true.

Tell me, Mary, whom do you love in this house?
'I love my dear mother in this house.'
That, Mary, is not so, is not so.
That Mikhailovna, is not true, is not true.

It is not a scarlet ribbon clinging to the wall
But Ivan in pressing Mary to his heart.

Tell me, Mary, whom do you love in this house?
'I love dear Ivan in this house.'
That, Mary, is so, is so.
That, Mary, is true, is true.¹¹⁴

After the bride has served the guests with some food, the young couple are led to their room. The rites immediately preceding the consummation also feature ritual

dialogue: after undressing her husband, the bride asks for permission to join him in bed; his consent is the formula 'The bed is mine, the will is yours'. Once in bed, the best man 'delivers a few lashes over the cover and asks the bride and groom each in turn, 'Who are you sleeping with?' Receiving the correct answers, he and all the guests depart'. The dowry is collected the following day, when 'she is mocked... with words like "the leavings will laugh at you for three years now". She must maintain her self-control and silently pass by the laughing people'.¹¹⁵

In Japan, the new bride was forced to enter her husband's house by the back door, then walk three times round the fireplace:

This was based on the idea that the woman who became a member of the other's family had to know she was in the lowest position of all other members (symbolized by entering at the back door) and beg the god's pardon to permit her to become one of the family members (because Japanese believe that god dwells at the place such as furnace or threshold even today).

Before entering the house, the bride drank water mixed from that of her parent's house and that of her husband's. A ritual exchange followed:

On her finishing drinking, the cup which she used... had to be broken. Then her father [said] 'we [have] passed our daughter [to you]', her husband's father replied that 'we've accepted her'. She could enter into the new house only after that.¹¹⁶

The element of 'replaying' is clear in another example from the Gusii. The custom of insulting the groom as he arrives to take possession of his bride is inverted the following day as she arrives to take up residence in his homestead. The women of both sides pride themselves on their performance at both ceremonies; 'the mother-in-law and other married women (members of the husband's homestead and village, not his lineage) would keep the wife out and upbraid her for laziness and disrespect for elders... this was recognised as a contest'.¹¹⁷

c. Delivering the dowry

The transference of property in the form of a dowry is another of the main stages in the ceremonial sequence. The handing over of the goods can also be accompanied by a refusal rite with ritual dialogue, which, in the following example from Val d'Ajou, is clearly related to the 'hidden bride' custom described above:

On the evening before the wedding, the groom-to-be brings fifteen young men, led by a fiddler, to demand the dowry of his intended. The father states that he is no longer the master of his house. The girl appears with her companions and several defenders. They bring out an old chest so as not to damage the real one; a serious contest ensues. If the young men succeed in getting hold of the bread-pan, the effects are handed over. If they encounter too much resistance they declare a truce, and, by giving breast-pins, lace and ribbons, they 'buy' the chest. Then the girls, who had removed the wheels of their cart and hidden the horse, put everything back in order again, loading the clothes and effects of the fiancée themselves.¹¹⁸

From this account there is a suggestion that the father abdicates responsibility in order to turn the occasion into what amounts to a 'battle of the sexes', similar to the 'hidden bride' and various abduction customs. It is another separation rite which meets with ritual resistance from those losing 'part of their own'; not the bride herself, but all her worldly goods, perhaps symbolising the feminine, domestic aspect of marriage as joint work.

In the canton of Bain, the ceremonial arrival of the furniture on the evening before the marriage, the *agouvreux*, is presided over by the seamstresses who prepared the 'trousseau'. They sing a dialogue-song with the fiancé:

Before entering, they sing an enumerative song, then ask the fiancé to authorise them to do their best, which he agrees to declaring, also in song, that he will obey his sweetheart and be faithful to her.¹¹⁹

One could see this last example as being related to custom marking the arrival of the bride at the groom's house, to be 'acted out' the following day: the women ask to be allowed to work, and the groom allows them entry, but the promise this time is not

from the bride but the groom, a promise of fidelity made publicly and analogous to the Christian vow made in church. The 'delivering the bride' ceremony could then be seen as a 'replaying' of the dowry scene from the previous evening, with different participants.

In India, the *itak*, 'dowry song', is a dialogue between the dowry-bringers and mother of the bridegroom:

Today the dowry comes from Janakpur
 O Mother take the dowry.
 Today the dowry comes from Janakpur
 O Mother take the dowry.
 'Father growls the dowry is too small'.
 Today the dowry comes from Janakpur
 O Mother take the dowry.
 'Pick up the dowry and take it away
 My boy will stay a bachelor'.
 Today the dowry comes from Janakpur
 O Mother take the dowry.¹²⁰

IV. Conclusion

The intention of the foregoing is to indicate first the wide distribution of ritual dialogue in the context of marriage, and the often remarkable similarities between the customs of disparate cultures. It is also clear that these threshold rituals occur at those stages in the ceremonial sequence at which the two parties meet, where incorporation is sought and conflict is to be avoided. Indirect expression, in particular the use of allegory, is one of the main verbal strategies employed. The dialogic structures are also shown to be applied by participants and communities to each successive encounter; inverted forms amount to a 'replaying' of earlier events, as the ritual is 'acted out' with different 'characters'. The public nature of these encounters is also shown to be important; while offering a degree of entertainment, there is a suggestion of a 'contractual' aspect to the proceedings. The audience are effectively witnesses to the utterances of those involved, their words amounting to

sworn oaths which, in the eyes of the community, are irrevocable.

We may now turn to a detailed examination of ritual dialogue in three Celtic-language cultures: those of Brittany, Wales and Scotland.

Notes

1. 'Katzenmusik'; sometimes roofs, stoves and houses were destroyed. Paul Hugger, Handbuch der Schweizerischen Volkskunde 3 Vols. (Zürich: Offizin Zürich Verlags AG, 1992) 130. *Kilt* (O.G. *chwilti* night, evening) c.f night-visiting.
2. Ilka Peter, Gasslbrauch und Gasslspruch in Oesterreich (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1952) 21.
3. Hugger, 130.
4. Peter 22. I am grateful to Angelika Kleber for her assistance with the Austrian texts. *Gassl*, a narrow alleyway or close. This may have a sexual connotation.
5. Peter 25
6. Matthias Zender, ed. Atlas der Deutschen Volkskunde x vols (Marburg: Elwert, 1959-1964) 85.
7. Zender 91.
8. Peter 39
9. Peter 105. Trans CL.
10. Peter 105, trans CL.
11. All verses Peter 106-109, trans. AK.
12. Eilert Sundt, On Marriage in Norway trans. Michael Drake. CUP 1980: 153.
13. Letter from Miya Urushizaki, Tokyo University: 2-3.
14. Urushizaki: 3-4.
15. Urushizaki: 4.
16. Manuel I: 232
17. The verb 'enlever' also means 'to carry off or kidnap'. The abduction motif in marriage ritual is briefly discussed below.
18. Perron, Franc-Comtois 94-97. in Manuel, 233. Trans NM.
19. Marie Bonnet Légendes des Vallées vaudoises: 63. In Van Gennep's Les Hautes-Alpes Traditionnelles (1943) Curandera reprint 1990. Vol. I: 78. Trans NM.
20. Manuel I: 252. Trans. NM.

21. Manuel I: 251. Trans. NM.
22. Manuel I: 252. Trans. NM.
23. Manuel I: 265. Trans. NM.
24. Elard Hugo Meyer, Deutsche Volkskunde Berlin: Gruyter, 1921: 169. Trans. CL.
25. Hautes-Alpes 90. Trans. NM.
26. Manuel: I: 268.
27. Euclide Milano, Dalla Culla alla Bara 51-55. Trans. NM. Milano collected in the region of Cuneo on the French-Italian border towards the end of the 19th century. In Les Hautes-Alpes 92.
28. Water and lime: Arvieux; candles, embers and lamps extinguished: Cuneo, Monregalese, Savoie; shovel: Saint-Véran; plates upturned: Monregalese; handkerchief: Alba; wheat: l'Isère, Cuneo. Hautes-Alpes: 92.
29. 'Cette coutume de l'intermédiaire professionnel s'est perdue peu à peu dans les Hautes-Alpes au cours du XIXe siècle... la demande par le jeune homme a remplacé l'ancienne demande par son père. [this custom of the professional intermediary was lost little by little in the course of the 19th century... the asking by the young man replaced the former demand by his father. Hautes-Alpes: 88.
30. Hautes-Alpes 88. Trans. NM.
31. Walter Edwards, Modern Japan through its Weddings (Stanford: SUP, 1989) 55.
32. Walter Edwards, Modern Japan through its Weddings, (Stanford: SUP, 1989: 54-66. Vermier Y. Chiu, Marriage Laws and Customs of China, (Hong Kong: Chinese U of HK, 1966): 1-14, 107. In modern Japan the mediation process is relatively informal, although a formal process **kekkon sodanjo** exists for 'difficult cases'; for example, a girl looking for a husband to look after her family, who have no son of their own. Article 972 of the Chinese Civil Code states: 'A contract to marry must be made by the parties themselves', invalidating and making subject to annulment any agreement made by the paterfamilias on behalf of a member of his family.
33. Manuel I: 267. Trans. NM. Eilert Sundt, in On Marriage in Norway, notes: 'There are usually one or two people, who, for different reasons, have an interest in going between parties making suggestions and giving advice. In the olden times it was the case that a man bought his wife. It was expressly called 'buying', since it was the girl's father [who] had to determine how much she should get as dowry and how great a sum in money and goods must be given by him who would have the girl'. 154, 151.
34. Manuel I: 269. Trans. NM.
35. Manuel 271. Trans. NM.

36. Paul Hugger, ed., Handbuch der Schweizerischen Volkskunde 3 Vols. Zürich: Offizin, 1992: I: 133. Trans. CL.

37. Meyer 169.

38. Ivanova Radost, Traditional Bulgarian Wedding trans. Nikolina Panova. Sofia: Svat, 1987: 11.

39. Radost 14.

40. Radost 15-16.

41. Radost 16. The quotation is from the Kyustendil region.

42. Radost 16.

43. Radost 17. Marriages were avoided during harvest time and when the fields were being turned, since it was believed that sexual intercourse during these times might bring droughts.

44. Radost 19.

45. Radost 21.

46. See Hanns Bächtold, Die Verlobung im Volks- und Rechtsbrauch. Basel, 1913: 141-151; Meyer 170-1.

47. Radost 20-1. The riddles she gives are:

'Go to Varna, build a fire amidst the sea, dig up the sea and bring it back to me along with a kindled fire.' - A lit icon lamp.

'Go to [place] and there, there is the den of a vixen with her brood; catch the brood and bring it back to me.' - Honey.

'Go to [place]; there you will find a blind well: close your eyes, reach out into the well and bring me back whatever you catch.' - A skin of cheese.

'Go to [place] there is something there: its feet woolly, its head shaking, take it and bring it back to me.' - A millet plant with root.

48. H.E. Kennedy, 'Polish Peasant Courtship and Wedding Customs and Folksong.' Folklore 36 (March 1925): 51.

49. Kennedy 53-4.

50. Alex E. Alexander, Russian Folklore - an anthology in English translation Massachusetts: Nordland, 1975: 49.

51. Alexander: 82.

52. op.cit.: 51.

53. Russian Folklore: 53-62. The exact order of this dialogue form lament is:

Bride solo
 Bride to father
 Father's reply (prose)
 Bride to mother
 - to brothers
 - to sisters
 - to girlfriends
 - to sister
 Sister to bride
 Bride's reply
 Bride to brother
 Brother's reply

54. Stiegert Hummel and Paul G. Brewster, 'Games of the Tibetans' FF Communications LXXVII no. 187: 17.

55. Franz Boas, 'Ethnographische Bemerkungen über die Vandau.' Zeitschrift für Ethnologie 35 (1923) 13-23. Trans. CL.

56. Meyer 169. Trans. CL.

57. Van Gennep found evidence of the 're-asking' custom on the evening before the wedding in la Corrèze and la Maurienne; on the wedding morning in Neuvic (Corrèze), pays Chartrain, Bucheley in Seine-et-Oise, Montigny (Yonne), in the Léon region 'par le barde'. No examples of dialogues are given, and we may note that he finds no evidence of this custom in Brittany. Manuel: 307. Trans. NM.

58. Manuel I: 307. Trans. NM.

59. Manuel I: 307.

60. Manuel I: 325.

61. Monnier Vestiges in Manuel I: 325.

62. Manuel I: 325.

63. Van Gennep notes 'non-dialogue' versions of the 'hidden bride' custom in:

Brittany: Finistère, Morbihan, Côtes-du-Nord and Ille-et-Vilaine. All take place on the morning of the wedding. As we shall see, the custom with dialogue in Brittany is a good deal more widespread than Van Gennep thought.

Elsewhere in France: Berry, Bourbonnais (avec chanson spéciale), Bourgogne, Franche-Comté, Languedoc (one case in two hundred localities), Lorraine, Lyonnais - Loire (in sixty-nine places, one, Beaujolais, with dialogue), Nivernais, Roussillon and Savoie.

Manuel: 325-328.

Piémont (Monreglese)

Hautes-Alpes: 100.

64.Hautes-Alpes: 100. Trans NM.

65.Josef Hanika, 'Die 'verlassene Braut' im Hochzeitsbrauch und die Aufgebotsszene in Wittenweilers 'Ring' Bayerisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde (1957) 109. Trans. CL.

66.Paul Geiger, Deutsches Volkstum in Sitte und Brauch 5 Vols. Berlin: Gruyter (1936): 5: 112. Trans. CL.

67.Geiger 115. Trans. CL.

68.Nina Epton, Spanish Fiestas (London: Cassell, 1968) 63.

69.Tekla Dömötör, Hungarian Folk Customs trans. Judith Elliot. (Gyomaendröd: Corvina, 1988) 55.

70.Dömötör 55

71.Radost 39. The **koum** is the chief ritual figure officiating at the wedding, usually the godfather of the groom. The **starisko** is a husband and wife team, also performing ritual functions. The party are armed, despite this being forbidden by the authorities. The author points out, however, that the weapons were incapable of being fired properly.

72.Radost 40.

73.Radost 40.

74.Radost 41. The **dever** is the bridegroom's assistant at the wedding, usually his unmarried younger brother or cousin. There may be two **deveri**.

75.Radost 44.

76.Radost 44. Her description is as follows:

'The **strashnik** jumped out as if from nowhere, to divert the attention of the wedding party... he was thus called because he wore a 'frightening' outfit: a long chemise; a woman's belt wound the wrong way; an apron also turned inside out; his face was blackened by soot; on his head he wore a piece of animal skin instead of a cap; he had a yarn beam instead of a rifle thrown over his shoulder, a very long Turkish pipe with a piece of dung stuck at the end instead of the pipe itself; he carried a sheep or cattle leg bone instead of a pistol, a gunpowder bag full of ashes instead of powder, in order to 'fire at' those who might dare pick a fight or make an attempt to abduct the bride.'

77.Radost 49

78.See, for example, Geiger, 114.

79.Alexander: 82.

80.Alexander 85.

81.Alexander 84-5.

82.William G Archer Songs for the Bride: Wedding Rites of Rural India New York: Columbia UP, 1985: 45.

The Bihar region is north-west of Bengal and south of Nepal. This song is from Kayaoth in the north west, a Bhojpuri-speaking community.

83.William Crooke, 'The Lifting of the Bride' Folklore 13 (1902) 232.

84.Urushizaki: 7-8.

85.Karin Barber, I Could Speak Until Tomorrow (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) 106.

86.Barber 111

87.Barber 112

88.Barber 105

89.Barber 104

90.Dejo Faniyi, 'Ekun iyawo: a traditional Yoruba nuptial chant' Abimbola (1975) quoted in Barber 314.

91.Barber 105

92.Barber 105

93.Barber 107

94.Lee Haring, Verbal Arts in Madagascar: Performance in Historical Perspective (Phildelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1992) 155-6.

95.Haring 61

96.Haring 100, 35.

97.Haring 169

98.Haring 165

- 99.Haring 176
- 100.Decary 1951 36-37
- 101.Mair 130-1
- 102.Haring 73
- 103.Decary 36-7
- 104.Haring 157.
- 105.Haring 189
- 106.Haring 158
- 107.Hautes-Alpes: 153. Trans. NM.
- 108.Hautes-Alpes 152. Trans. NM.
- 109.Euclide Milano Dalla Culla all Barra: 93-5 in Hautes-Alpes: 154. Trans. NM.
- 110.Milano, 154 in Hautes-Alpes: 154. Trans. NM.
- 111.Meyer 182. Trans. CL.
- 112.Radost 54.
- 113.Radost 75
- 114.Russian Folklore: 90-1.
- 115.Russian Folklore: 91-4.
116. Urushizaki: 6.
- 117.Mair 130
- 118.Manuel 356. Trans. NM.
- 119.Orain, Ile-et-Vilaine: 180-2 in Manuel: 364. Trans. NM.
- 120.Archer: 60. From the Janakpur region, family seat of the legendary King Janak, father of Sita, Ram's bride.



Figure 1

Chapter Two

Brittany

I. Introduction

We have seen that ritual dialogue between the two families about to be united features in the ceremonial sequences marking the steps of separation, transition and incorporation in the marriage customs of many diverse cultures. We shall now turn our attention to a more detailed analysis of the traditions of Brittany, whose distinctive identity is underpinned by vestiges of the Celtic civilisation.

According to Jean-Michel Guilcher, one of the most distinguished commentators on Breton culture, verbal art, and its expression in play and competition, is one of the region's distinguishing features. The spirit of competition, he notes, is present in dance, play, and work, as well as poetry.¹ Of particular interest to this discussion are those contests in verse which may form part of what Guilcher terms 'les jeux de participation dramatique', performed principally at weddings. He notes, "whether they precede the 'special day' or follow it, they are the active amusements of a restricted society, composed of relatives, friends and neighbours, who can enjoy themselves without restrictions".² In the discussion below we shall examine matchmaking and betrothal, and the dramas of 'fetching the bride' (*Ar Goulenn*) and the ceremony of the dowry-chest (*Fest Ann Arvel*).

II. Matchmaking and betrothal

In customs of courtship and marriage, the use of indirect forms of communication in order

to maintain social standing and avoid causing offence is highly developed in Brittany. In his study of popular dance, Guilcher describes the elaborate etiquette surrounding dance in rural areas in the nineteenth century:

Between members of a restricted group, constantly having to show, directly or indirectly, that they are in agreement, injuries to one's self-esteem heal badly and have formidable consequences. Also, one usually avoids expressing directly those questions and answers which touch upon the weaknesses of the asker. There are indirect ways of asking a girl to dance, *as there are with asking her hand in marriage...* when a lad asks a girl for a dance he sits some distance away opposite her and fixes her with his eyes; if she accepts, she goes towards him, if she refuses, she turns away. In this way he will not be shamed by a refusal. Elsewhere, the invitation is made verbally, but in such a way as to provide the asker with a dignified way out in case of refusal. For example, the boy asks to carry the girl's umbrella. If she gives it to him, it also means that she implicitly agrees to dance with him. (Trégor, in Cournouaille)³ (my italics)

Parents advised girls to accept the offer of any man, drunk or sober, unless he was disguised. If a girl did refuse, she had 'fait un affront public au demandeur [publicly insulted the asker], and he was ridiculed.⁴

It is perhaps unsurprising, given such pressure for indirect expression, that in Brittany, unlike the rest of France, the use of part-time or professional matchmakers was not an option, but a necessity:

The marriage proposal is never made to the parents of the young girl by the suitor himself, nor by his father: it is made by a recognised 'mandataire' who has to be very well-informed about the fortunes of both parties, and besides this have the verbal skill to plead his case with eloquence. He is generally a tailor who, for once, finds himself treated with respect by the young man; sometimes he is a miller, or in the case of Plougastel a tavern-keeper.⁵

In Plougastel, however, the tailors were also involved; parents tried, through dressmakers,

neighbours and especially tavern-keepers, to get information about the potential partner.⁶

Maryse Le Roux points out that the mediator could approach the boy, rather than always the reverse:

After this first period of observation and reflection, it was then necessary to make the project concrete. A first formal approach took place between the *darbodeur* [go-between] and the young man, initiated by one or the other. The young man's parents were informed, then came the time to 'darboder' the girl... this mediating role... was part of the job of a tailor.⁷

Cambry, writing in the eighteenth century, also mentions the ubiquity of tailors: 'Tailors, an unrespected breed of men, but found everywhere, are here the intermediaries in almost all marriages'.⁸ Tailors are also mentioned in this connection by Pierre-Jakez Hélias in his study *The Horse of Pride*.⁹ Millers and publicans were static figures to whom the whole community resorted and could therefore serve as 'clearing houses' for information on prospective partners. In addition to this communal function, tailors were mobile and had access to the interior life of families, and could therefore observe the relative economic standings of each - an important factor when choosing a match. Kevin Danaher could be describing much of rural Europe when he says of Ireland:

Within the memory of our grandparents there were many craftsmen on the roads, journeymen coopers, smiths, carpenters, saddlers, shoemakers, stonemasons and many others. Tailors came and stayed in the farmhouse until all the clothes needed by the family were made, then they passed on to the next farmhouse.¹⁰

Matchmakers were needed partly because of the difficulty of communication between villages:

One went from one farm to another, crossing fields through gaps in the embankments... the water and the mud tracks made communication

between the villages difficult. Young people saw each other infrequently, and if they didn't find a partner *ad hoc* in their own neighbourhood they had to resort to go-betweens. Girls were guarded closely - their place was in the home.¹¹

There existed, however, places for young people to meet - festivals, fairs, and the three-day post wedding celebrations, where after some night-fishing, the young repaired to cafés, which made the matchmaker's job somewhat easier. For the purpose of meeting those from neighbouring villages, games of boules were arranged, 'through which there was no official communication, but where information was diffused in an improvised and efficient way'.¹²

The main reason for matchmakers was, however, the pressure to avoid conflict with others in the community or those from other villages:

A mediator was indispensable. In case of refusal, one was not directly offended. The matchmaker could have acted on his personal initiative, it was he who had failed, and the two families could continue to greet each other after Mass without reservation.¹³

Bodénés makes the same point; 'It was much easier, in a case where the attempt was unsuccessful, to say the 'bazvalan' [go-between] had acted without the parents' knowledge. If no-one was a dupe, honour was safe'.¹⁴ Pierre-Jakez Hélias gives this account of the occasion when the matchmaker and suitor turned up seeking his aunt;

He had come all prepared to propose to her, and had been careful to let us know he was coming a few days in advance. But ever since then, the whole family had been in a flutter, for Lisette had told us straight away that she didn't find him suitable, that was all... now she had to refuse him, taking every possible precaution so that neither he nor his family would be offended. Alain le Goff had clearly thought out his answers, as had my mother... my father was to stay out of it altogether... The large door was already closed when he arrived in the dark of night, accompanied by the

man who had been entrusted with pleading his cause and who hadn't had time to prepare his arguments... both men entered slowly, apologising for bothering anyone at that time of night... My Aunt Lisette wasn't there. She was in another room, sewing and waiting for the interview to come to an end. Meanwhile conversation had begun in the kitchen, as my mother put some bottles out to quiet everyone's emotions. Unfortunately I never did hear a thing concerning the proposal itself or the soothing phrases of refusal, for in accordance with the rites regarding visitors, they first talked about the weather, about a funeral of a man in town... The next day, when I questioned my grandfather... he merely stated that my mother and he had managed the conversation in such a way that both visitors had understood beforehand how useless it would have been to ask the question at all. They had left without ever having raised their voices and without a bitter or spiteful word. As they went out, the *baz-valan* simply told his protégé that he would now have to look elsewhere. And the suitor replied, sighing: 'I probably will. You can't win every time.'¹⁵

We note the strong emphasis on verbal skill, both on preparation for the event and in the performance. There is the now-familiar preamble, followed by astute 'management' of the conversation by the family, which strongly suggests the employment of indirect formulae in communicating refusal. Equally clear is the real threat of ill-feeling if the occasion is not handled skilfully enough.

As with the etiquette surrounding dance, non-verbal methods could be employed to signal refusal to the matchmaker. Villemarqué noted three ways of indicating non-agreement before a word is even spoken: a delay in opening the door; the embers in the fire turned over; or, as the go-between crosses the threshold, the lady of the house turns towards the fire as if she was unaware of his presence, holding a pancake in her fingertips.¹⁶ He also points out that the matchmaker would turn back in any case if he came across ill-omens in the form of a magpie or a crow on the way. Brékilien cites these, and adds that an upturned frying-pan was also a bad sign. He notes, 'he will know that it

would be best to turn round without having said a word. This way an awkward and embarrassing situation for everyone will be avoided, and the suitor cannot say that he received an injury to his self-esteem'.¹⁷ Le Roux describes the visit of the 'darbodeurs' in Guidel, noting that the matchmaking function of the *bazvalan* persisted until modern times; although his role in Cornouaille did not survive long after the Great War, she can cite couples from this area married by 'darbodage' in 1959 and 1960.¹⁸

When the 'darbodeur', or more frequently the two 'darbodeurs' had arrived at a farm, at night - no-one should know - they announced their presence soon enough. If the welcome was frosty... the evening rapidly turned sour. But if the contrary, the matchmakers sometimes stayed all night. One began by praising the boy, and exaggerating a little; that was all part of the game: he was a worker, kind to his mother, he was always home at the appointed time. Then the second stage of the discussion: did the family have means? If it was the son of a landowner, one listed the farms, the fields. If they were at a tenant's home, they also evaluated the conditions for offering land and rented buildings. And in both cases... one would see whether there was a vacancy for a young girl. Would the sister of the boy leave her place? Often, one of the conditions of the marriage of a brother was the marriage and thus departure of a sister. It also happened that the newly-wed would move in next to his wife, but this was less frequent and less esteemed. At the time of this first discussion at the house of the parents the girl is present from the start. Her opinion is asked and, if it is favourable, the father concludes 'If it's good for her it's good for me'. The coffee-mill is turned and everyone knows that they will be going to a wedding soon. The matchmakers have now to organise the next meeting: the 'getting to know each other' meal *guenedel* where the two families decide the date of the engagement.¹⁹

In this account, the matchmakers' verbal skill is displayed in their inventive eulogising of the young man, and their description of land and property as yet unseen by the girl's family. There may also be complex reciprocal arrangements on other matters to resolve before agreement can be reached. There is, however, nothing to suggest that there was any ritual or indirect language in use, although the author clearly separates their

'presentation' into two 'stages', with the matchmakers' embellishing of the truth as a traditional part of the 'game'. The girl's father may not have been mute throughout, but there is no indication that he responded in kind, praising his daughter. It is not clear how the two matchmakers shared the burden of their task. It should also be noted that here the families do not know each other - the mediators' eulogising and enumerating is primarily designed to impart information the girl's family do not have. The girl's consent is stressed, and her father's response is clearly a formulaic one, variations of which will be seen below.

A different picture of a first-visit emerges in an account from Plougastel-Daoulas:

The 'bazvalans', married people, would go at night to seek out the parents of the future bride or groom, taking great care not to be seen. They would talk of the rain and fine weather and would slip into the conversation that they had come for the son or daughter. The father would pretend to look astonished, and if he answered 'We'll see' it was pointless to persist; if they offered coffee to the matchmakers the agreement was sealed. Some time later, and after two consecutive Sundays, the family visited, which permitted viewing of the farm and especially for the couple to meet one another if they hadn't met before. Everything in the house was shown, even things which had been borrowed from the neighbours for the occasion, which was called 'ar weladenn'.²⁰

Here we have evidence that the matchmakers, again a pair, avoid bringing up the subject immediately, but contrive to introduce the purpose of their visit by subtle means. Although their approach is indirect, their language is not, since they go on to discuss the match openly. The father's response is of interest; he knows all along the matchmakers' chat is merely a preamble and plays along by 'pretending' to look astonished. It would be uncivil, perhaps risky, to have shown the pair the door before this point, and so he follows the 'script' dictated by custom and either delivers a formulaic refusal, which is in the indirect

form of a conditional 'We'll see' or extends hospitality towards them, in the case of agreement.

One of the common terms for matchmaker is *bazvalan*, and commentators are in general agreement that this signifies 'baz' - rod, of 'valan' - broom.²¹ Villemarqué gives one definition: 'It is generally a tailor who is the *bazvalan*, or the young man's messenger of love... he has often, in order to be recognised in the exercise of his functions.. a branch of flowering broom, the symbol of love and union; which is the origin of his name'.²² Cambry gives a somewhat less flowery explanation: 'The marriage proposal is made in verse by the 'disputeurs' or poets, who are here called Bazvalan (rod of broom) on account of their carrying a branch of this when they go to make their proposals. Broom in the time of our fathers, was the emblem of the herald'.²³ Pierre-Jakez Hélias recalls how his grandfather characterised the plant:

Broom was made in the image of woman, always affected, and bowing to the first passerby if there's the slightest breath of wind. Broom doesn't flower for long; it lacks strength... Be like broom my girl... beautiful to the eye, elegant, trim and gentle, with delicate flowers. Broom is just like a woman ought to be.²⁴

We will recall that the Bulgarian matchmakers also carried a flowering branch on their mission. Although an obvious symbol of fertility, Cambry's linking of it with the traditions of his ancestors is interesting. Confirmation of a messenger with staff being the sign of a herald is confirmed elsewhere in the Celtic world:

In ancient Ireland men who carried important messages were known by certain signs. In the *Táin* we read of such a messenger from the enemy host coming to Cuchulainn bearing a white hazel staff in one hand and a naked sword in the other. 'Good my lad,' said Cuchulainn, 'these are the tokens of a herald' to a youth of his following who did not recognise the signs which gave the messenger uninterrupted passage.²⁵

This freedom of movement was one of the privileges accorded to the *bazvalan*; Villemarqué remarks 'among the ancient Bretons he possessed such a respectable character that he could pass from one party to another without risk by means of his flowering branch.'²⁶ The French *camp*, which I have taken to mean 'party' can also be translated as 'army', which ties in with the description from the *Táin*, and may lend meaning to the go-between in marriage seen as a mediator between opposing 'armies'. As we have seen, many cultures conduct marriage negotiations in the idiom of a battle, with a neutral mediator hired to limit hostilities and bring the two sides to a peaceful union. The *bazvalan* is thus described not only as a poet, but as a mediator between two armies. Anciently these functions may indeed have been combined, since it is known that poets played an active role in the pre-battle rites of the Celts, as well as officiating at weddings.

A further significance in the origin of the term *bazvalan* could lie in the use of broom as the material for his staff. Wimberley notes that the plant was 'most potent against witches and spirits' as well as the evil eye, a subject dealt with fully below.²⁷ By employing broom as his sign, the matchmaker may have been attempting to neutralise any ill-will directed by jealous eyes and so increase his chances of success.

In the 19th-century accounts above, little more than the ability to artfully praise and exaggerate could be identifiable as 'poetic' skills of the go-between. Earlier evidence, however, suggests that at an early stage in negotiations, perhaps on first meeting, there was a poetic contest between two bards representing the families. Cambry states:

One of these 'discoureurs' or poets in the area around Landerneau artfully ended his request, and forced his competitor to give up the pretty girl he

was defending.

Was she the girl of the house of Penmar'ch,
I have asked for, for so long?
Is she a virgin? Concede and give her hand in marriage:
Is she no longer? Keep her.

When the matchmaker has made his proposals, the parties are brought together and they adopt or reject them: sometimes they have never seen each other before when they are united in this way.²⁸

'The parties' could refer to the two families, since the groom, as in other traditions, may be absent. The 'artful' concluding verse forces the bard's 'competitor', 'defending' the girl, to concede defeat and 'yield' her. We may speculate that the 'propositions' were made inside the house, the present exchange forming part of an entry ritual which took place at or near the threshold, as in the majority of those examples given in the previous chapter. It appears that 'defeat' follows as a result of the other poet's being unable (or unwilling) to offer a suitable reply, and that 'winning' leads to the right to enter the house. In this example, the girl is spoken of directly - the bard does not use an indirect formulation which would enable refusal to be communicated during the dialogue. The precise function of the dialogue remains unclear at this stage, beyond ritual resistance and the necessity not to be seen to yield too readily to an advance of this nature. There seems to be no doubt that according to Cambry, such meetings took place between complete strangers. Whether it was the families who had never met, or the couple, or both, is impossible to tell from this rather slight account.

Villemarqué's description of a first visit by the *bazvalan* is markedly different. He describes the following as occurring 'en général'. First, the *bazvalan* greets the threshold

and if he is welcome,

once he has arrived, and before he has finished speaking, one cries out joyously: Come in! if someone has prepared a feast for him, if one is eager to cover, in his honour, the table with the white tablecloth kept for special occasions, everything is fine. After having sat down a moment, he addresses a few words in a low voice to the mother, who has come out to deliberate with him; then she returns to put things to her daughter (who is already predisposed) the agreement is made. In one month there will be the wedding.²⁹

Although this is a 'first meeting' - Villemarqué outlines the non-verbal methods of refusal - ritual language is limited to a greeting addressed to the threshold, which the family interrupt if they wish negotiations to go ahead. Presumably he was allowed to complete his welcome in silence if the reverse were the case. Unlike the example given by Cambry, the girl and her family are 'predisposed' to the matchmaker, which suggests some kind of prior arrangement between the two families or the couple themselves. The main purpose of the present visit would appear to be the girl's consent, since her mother's role is only to communicate terms, and the father is not mentioned. Perhaps this further suggests that if families are already in accord, the entry and refusal rites are played down, while indirect formulations (for example, an allegorical discussion of the girl and terms) are unnecessary. Tom Taylor gives this description from Cornouaille, a region where he notes that 'it is a matter of religion to adhere [to marriage rituals] with the utmost scrupulousness'.

When the tailor has received his commission to open negotiations with the selected maiden, he visits her parents' farm, accosts her, generally alone, and puts forward in the best light the means, looks, and accomplishments of his client. If these find favour in the girl's sight, he is referred by her to the parents. If they approve the match, the tailor formally assumes the function of 'Bazvalan' or 'messenger of marriage,' and, wearing one red and one violet stocking, brings the wooer, accompanied by his nearest male relative, to the home of his intended. This step is called the 'asking of conference.' The heads of the two families make acquaintance, while the

lovers are left to converse apart. When they have wooed and whispered their fill, they join their parents hand in hand, wine and white bread are brought out, the young pair drink from the same glass and eat with the same knife, the bases of the marriage treaty are fixed, and a day is settled for the meeting of the two families.³⁰

This 'asking of conference', where the engagement is made official is termed by Bodénés '*an akord*' (betrothal)³¹ and it is sealed by an incorporation rite.³² We may note from Taylor's account the stage-by-stage forward movement and the importance of eulogy in the matchmaker's task. In Ille-et-Vilaine the incorporation rite involves a ritual exchange: 'they close their right fist, stretch it towards one another, getting nearer, and hook their little fingers; the girl says 'hooked' and her wooer 'hooked'.³³

The *akord* was made 'de façon solennelle' [solemnly] throughout Brittany, and regarded seriously by the community: 'Their promises are now bound one to the other, and it is rare that the engagement would be broken off by those involved: public opinion would judge this very severely... moreover, it is the same word, *dimézi*, which denotes betrothal and marriage proper.³⁴ After the *akord* came the *frikot dimézi*, the betrothal feast, followed by mutual visits, *weladenn*. Then the *bazvalan*, accompanied by a male relative of the groom, went around the community inviting guests to the wedding: 'When the two bidders ['inviteurs'] appear in a house, they hold themselves very erect at the entrance to the room, a staff in their hands, and, after greeting all in attendance, proclaim in a solemn voice'. According to Villemarqué, this was done in verse: 'to announce his presence, he raps three times on the door, and sings the normal words of welcome; 'Good luck and happiness attend this place; here is the marriage messenger'.³⁵

III. Delivering the dowry (*Fest Ann Arvel*)

The next ritual act was the *Fest Ann Arvel*, the ceremony of the dowry-chest, in which a ritual dialogue formed a main part. It took place the evening before the wedding, and the occasion was the transportation of the dowry to the house of the groom or their future home if this was elsewhere. The chest and other furniture offered by the bride's family arrives 'en grand pomp' by horse and cart decorated with ribbons, and is accompanied by a procession of the bride's supporters, including her *bazvalan*. All the neighbourhood is present, and the procession makes its way to the sound of the *bombarde* (a wind instrument with a nasal tone) and the *biniou*, the Breton bagpipes.³⁶

Although the composition of the dowry had been discussed in all its details, and often with tough bargaining between the two families, it would be bad taste if the family of the young man accepted the goods without some protest. Accordingly the procession, when it arrives, finds the door closed. An 'avocat' of the fiancé half-opens the window and feigns astonishment:

'What is the meaning of this procession?'

The *bazvalan* who is, of course, part of the procession, steps forward and explains:

'We are bringing you a chest full of fine linen'.

- A chest? retorts the 'avocat' indignantly. We are expecting a young woman, but definitely not a chest. You must have come to the wrong door.

- This is the chest offered by the father-in-law.

- We are ready to welcome our gentle fiancée, but we want nothing else but her. To bring her along with presents is to insult us.

- If you don't open up with good grace, we will be obliged to force our way in.

The verbal duel is carried on for a long while, to the greater amusement of those present. The talent of the fiancé's representative must be demonstrated, even though everyone knows perfectly well why he is holding out, why he is, for his part, completely disinterested, and that if, to bring it to an end, submits to its acceptance, it is entirely so as not to

displease those who are offering it completely willingly. Very often it even ends up in a sham fight before the friends of the fiancée, triumphant, put the chest in the place of honour which had been prepared for it.³⁷

We may compare this with the dowry rituals described above, where ritual resistance, in the form of the barring and prolongation of entry, is shifted from the girl's family, and the arrival of the male retinue, to the young man's, and the arrival of the female cortège. The notion of 'honour' or 'reputation' is again stressed, with the cultural taboo against quick assent on the girl's part paralleled in the accusations of 'bad taste' and dishonour which would accompany ready acceptance of the dowry. The 'feigned astonishment' of those at the window parallels the girl's father who 'pretends not to understand' why the matchmaker has arrived. Whilst the arrival and physical introduction of the dowry and its placing in the young man's house may be a solemn rite, the dialogue itself is mainly seen as entertainment. Both performers and audience are complicitous in the fiction of refusal, and there is a clear link between the skilful extension of the dialogue, the increased appreciation of the onlookers and the greater prestige of the two performers. Brékilien stresses that all questions relating to the dowry have been settled beforehand, and therefore the opportunity for conflict has passed - there is no suggestion that the dialogue could have fulfilled any practical function in providing a face-saving method of refusal; it takes place, after all, in front of the community and the formulas used are direct rather than indirect. It can perhaps be seen as an incorporation rite performed as something akin to an open-air drama. As well as enjoying the show, the spectators would also have ample opportunity to view the contents of the dowry, displayed on decorated carts, and the rite therefore also functions as a means of articulating their involvement in what amounts to a

restructuring of the community. The reference to 'fine linen' may mean specifically 'bed-linen'; in Hungary it is only 'sheets, pillows and an eiderdown' which receive ceremonial transportation, and the dowry chest may thus be seen as closely associated with the bride's person and sexuality.³⁸

The threat of violent entry and the mock fighting which takes place correspond to the physical aspect of ritual resistance and the threat of abduction seen in the other marriage rites.

Brékilien describes this ritual as occurring generally throughout Brittany and taking place on the evening of the wedding. Villemarqué, however, collected a related account of the ritual in Léon, where the dowry arrived, richly decorated, on the third day of the wedding:

When the parents of the bride want to take the furniture into the groom's dwelling, the people of the house reject it, and a long contest begins between them. Eventually they reach a truce; the lady of the house covers the dowry-chest with a white table-cloth, and puts on it two piles of crêpes, a large jug of wine and a purse of money. The most esteemed of the groom's relatives fills a cup of wine and presents it to the oldest member of the bride's relatives then invites him to eat: the other wets his lips in the cup, and hands it back, offering crêpes to him in the same way. Each of the parents from the two sides do the same; and the chest is placed, in the midst of general 'bravos', in the most prominent place in the dwelling.³⁹

After the installation of the dowry-chest, a song is performed: 'it is a dialogue between a widow and a young man who asks for her hand in marriage'.

The young man

Hear me, my gentle widow, I come to court you; now is the time to make a match.

The widow

For this year, I am certainly not going to marry, nor ever end my mourning; I must leave for the convent, where God awaits me.

The young man

You are not going to the convent, not at all, I tell you, I say no; but to my village; the rose and all fine flowers are born for the garden.

The widow

The rose is born for the garden and the yew for the cemetery; I chose for a groom Him who created the world.

The young man

Take, take my sweet, take my silver ring; put it on your finger, and I will put on my own.

The widow

On my finger, I will never put on any ring save that of God; it is He who has received my fidelity.

The young man

So then you want to, want to kill me this moment?

The widow

Young man, I will remind you of the time you are wasting courting me, and the time you have wasted in the hope of a wedding ring. I pray to God, night and day, that we will find ourselves reunited in paradise.⁴⁰

Villemarqué is in some doubt as to how to interpret the dialogue: 'strange motif for a wedding song! What does this widow signify?' and speculates that it may be a 'memento mori' or be intended to inspire 'grave and pious thoughts at the moment they are setting up home together'. He adds '[is this not] a lost scene from the ancient poetic wedding games, in the same vein as those which take place on the morning of the first day?'. This dialogue song may be related to the ritual refusal of the 'former bride', where an old or otherwise non-virginal partner is first suggested, then refused. This ritual is examined more fully below.

IV. Fetching the bride (*Ar Goulenn*)

The dialogue Villemarqué refers to is the *Ar Goulenn*, the 'fetching of the bride' which takes place on the morning of the wedding. It is the most fully developed of the dialogues recorded in Brittany and takes the form of a verbal contest between the groom's messenger, the *bazvalan* or 'demandeur', and the girl's champion, the *breutaer* or 'disputeur'. The initial entrance ritual is followed by the refusal of a sequence of 'false brides' and final acceptance of the bride herself.

Cambry's account (1794) is from Scaer, a region he notes as being 'remote and inaccessible' and which has consequently 'preserved many of the most ancient forms and customs':

There, the poets, talkative men, made the marriage proposals. A Troubadour goes to the house of the girl for whom he is asking on behalf of his friend; at first he is received only at the door. Another Troubadour, the girl's protector, is armed: the debate begins in traditional verse, very often impromptu. The stranger makes compliments to all the people shut up [or 'concealed'] inside the house;⁴¹ he implores for them the grace of heaven, prosperous days and the pleasures of another life, he salutes the sovereign priests on earth; the noblemen who with their swords, protect the Cross, the Crown and the Poor. He finishes this exordium by apologising for his meagre talents, coming from where he lives, far from the 'grandes écoles', cities and enlightened men.⁴²

The ensuing dialogue runs to 80 lines, and is presented in prose and in French. From this introduction we may note the presence of formulaic elements: greetings, compliments and blessings at the threshold; the reference to a heroic tradition; and finally by what appears to be a convention, the supposed 'apology' for the poet's lack of talent and education. We will recall this was also a feature of the dialogue-form *Gasslgehen* from Austria. It is, of

course, inverted self-praise, and is only one of the rhetorical strategies at his disposal.

The dialogue proper begins with defender's thanking of his adversary - another convention - and this leads to his assertion that he does not have what the 'demandeur' is looking for. They have 'clay pots' but no 'bottle of perfume'. The girl, their 'angel' has been transported to a nunnery, having rejected the earthly in favour of dedicating herself to God. The girl is about to begin the process of moving from an ideal, high, 'sacred' state, virginity, to a lower 'profane' one, and on the morning of the wedding the girl is poised on the threshold between these two worlds. In this opening assertion resistance is expressed through the denial of this fact.

The 'disputeur' says goodbye to his counterpart, who replies with a maxim, another element of his rhetorical armoury. The idiom is that of a hunter searching for his prey; 'When our hunting dogs first lose the track, it's a poor huntsman who abandons the chase'. The groom's party posing as hunters is a device previously noted above in relation to the custom in Bulgaria. This 'hunter/hunted' association again identifies the male with vigour and assertiveness and the girl and her family with corresponding passivity. This is also seen elsewhere in references to the young man as a falcon - a bird of prey - and the girl as his female quarry.

After a mild threat, 'He who seeks is not made for refusal', the messenger begins a boasting eulogy of the groom, which might be seen as a stylised, heroic version of the more prosaic praise which the matchmaker delivered at the earlier meeting. The emphasis is on physical strength and aggression, and the examples range from the plausible 'no-one can beat him at wrestling' ('lui résiste à la lutte'), to the clearly fanciful and perhaps stock

'the deer has nothing of his swiftness'. 'La lutte', while carrying the specific meaning of 'wrestling' can also refer to any contest or struggle including, of course, the one taking place, which the messenger is fighting on the young man's behalf. The bard is thus demonstrating the qualities of the male side - they cannot be beaten. A further boast tells of the young man's heroic defence of his territory against a malevolent invader - perhaps another reference to the current contest - the message being that the girl's defender should emulate his skill and loyalty.

The champion in turn replies with a boasting eulogy of the girl; her practical skills, her capability of weaving with both strength and delicacy, her modesty, chasteness and unblemished reputation. Reference to her behaviour when dancing alerts us again to the importance of gesture and non-verbal communication, as described above by Guilcher, her behaviour is presented as further evidence of her high, virginal status. Reference is also made to the fact that she was aided in the guarding of her purity by female supporters (her mother and friend) which suggests a male-female polarisation - a battle of the sexes. After a rather theatrical apology, the girl's defender suggests the messenger look elsewhere:

Le Disputeur

J'en suis fâché, mais celle que vous demandez n'est plus ici, cherchez ailleurs.

Le Demandeur

Pourquoi, quand je vous indiquai la neuvième heure du matin de ce jour, quand je vous fis sentir le motif de ma visite, m'avez-vous laissé quelque espérance? Vous me trompez: celle que je cherche n'est pas sortie de la maison; tout le village l'aurait su, l'eût retenue...⁴³

[I am vexed for you, but she for whom you ask is not here, look elsewhere.

Why, when I indicated to you the ninth hour of this morning, when I let

you know the purpose of my visit, did you give me any hope? You deceive me: the one I am looking for did not leave the house; the whole village would have known, would have held her back.]

The messenger reminds the girl's champion that agreement had been reached between them earlier that morning, revealing that the present encounter is a 'replaying' of this prior visit. He asserts that the girl could not have left (for the nunnery) because the whole village would have known, and have held her back. This is an interesting reference to the role of the community - they support the wedding, and therefore the 'stranger' against one of their own. This suggests a link with the idea of marriage as a social obligation, as noted in the *Kiltgang* customs, with attendant charivari for those who do not comply. The close-knit cohesiveness of the local community is also alluded to.

The messenger continues with another maxim 'The yew is made for the cemetery... but a beautiful lily is made for the garden', a formula also present in the dialogue song between the widow and the young man, although in that case sung by the widow and identifying the rose rather than the lily. He signals the end of this stage of the dialogue by charging his opponent not to burden him any longer with 'words of despair' but to lead out the girl and thus be reconciled; 'we will sit next to one another in the presence of their parents'. This indicates that both sets of parents were present at the ritual, and the function of the poet has thus changed from matchmaker/negotiator to 'master of ceremonies'.

The defender then concedes with what appears to be a formula 'I bow to your lively insistance, your perseverance' and offers to show the groom's representative 'what we have in the house'.

The refusal sequence begins, where 'false' brides must be rejected through a mixture of praise and criticism without, one assumes, giving rise to offence. This also takes place on the threshold, but other members of the girl's family are invited to join in the judging of the poet's performance. At this point they may have appeared behind the bride's champion in the doorway, or perhaps gathered outside, as the girl's representative says 'grandfather and all of you stand up, and see if he who speaks is known as a gentleman'. This stage direction confirms the dialogue's dramatic nature, and perhaps the champion turns towards the inside of the house where the 'audience' have been sitting throughout, consistent with the initial greeting to those 'concealed in her house'.

The champion disappears and returns with an old woman. The messenger praises her appearance, but 'she has fulfilled well her task in this world... she has finished what the other should begin'. One might add that the girl's family has fulfilled its useful purpose in providing a bride, the 'old world' which must give way to the new. Similarly, the song accompanying the departure of the Bulgarian bride described the groom's home bathed in sunlight while a mist gathered over that of the girl, her home obscured and finally eclipsed by the dawning of a new generation.

The groom's messenger is then presented with a young widow. She appears youthful, but her virginal appearance belies the truth; he notices her finger has been used to 'rubbing' - perhaps a reference to a wedding ring - and this tells him that she has often scraped in a clay basin to find the porridge to give to her children. 'Bassin', however, can also mean 'abdomen' and 'bouillie' also 'pap'. This 'false virgin' is rejected.

The champion then appears with a ten-year-old girl. The messenger states that

eight years ago he would have wanted a girl like this. One assumes this is a humorous remark; perhaps the poet is suggesting that eight years ago he was also ten years old, which would make him a youthful eighteen at the moment of speaking, and he is underestimating his age for comic effect. One day she will have the good fortune to be a bride, but, like a flower, she must spend more time growing on the *espalier*. The true bride, however, also compared to a flower, needs only a basket to carry her to the wedding table.

The bride's representative gives way, in similar terms to the end of the first part of the dialogue: 'The triumph is yours, nothing perplexes you. I acknowledge your perseverance and firmness'. The champion's graceful admission of defeat also confirms that the ritual is a trial, intended to 'trouble' or 'confuse' the groom's poet.⁴⁴ Aside from verbal skill, it is 'firmness' and 'perseverance' which are acknowledged as necessary to wear down the defences of the girl's family.

The bride is presented, and the messenger instructed to 'Go and find the one who loves her... the promptness of your return will prove to us the friendship you have proclaimed'. A final trial - although it is hard to believe that at this late stage the groom's representative would wish to withdraw and fail to return. It is not clear whether he actually leaves to bring and formally present the young man, or, whether more likely, the groom is waiting with his parents somewhere 'in the wings'. The dialogue ends with a gesture of reconciliation; the two poets are to sit together and drink and sing old songs. The messenger had suggested this at the end of the first stage of the dialogue, and perhaps we can read this as a 'false ending' - not resolution, but the signal for movement to the next

stage of the trial, just as 'cues' were used in other examples outlined above.

Cambry is convinced of the ritual's dramatic qualities: 'In some other fragments of this kind, one can trace the origin of characters, since put on the stage, from these village amusements, which preceded "la comédie" (comic tradition)'.⁴⁵

The image of the two poets reconciled is rather contradicted by an earlier remark of Cambry's: 'The disputes in verse on wedding days were very lively here among the 'demandeurs'; they rarely finished without the poets resorting to their fists'.⁴⁶ 'Here' refers to the area between Roscoff and Pontusval, and perhaps in this region the combatants were more pugilistic, or Cambry may have chosen to emphasise the harmonious conclusion of the Scaer dialogue given his appreciation of its merit and importance.

In Villemarqué's account of the *Ar Goulemn* in Haute-Cornouaille, the groom's party sets out at sunrise on horseback, the groom and his best man at the head:

At a pre-arranged signal, his 'bazvalan' gets off his horse, walks up the steps of the house and declaims at the bride's door an improvised song, on an invariable theme, but arbitrarily modified, which must be replied to by the singer of the house, who performs for the girl, as the 'bazvalan' does for the young man, the office of champion, and who is called 'breutaer'. Both have the right, as a wedding gift, to a red woollen belt and a pair of white stockings with a yellow pattern. As I have previously mentioned, the theme and the form of their songs are always the same; I have had proof of this many times at different weddings. A sixteenth century manuscript in the possession of a wealthy inhabitant of Trégourez makes me equally certain. The French prose version Cambry published in his *Finistère* also confirms this.⁴⁷

The full text of the dialogue amounts to 115 lines, and Villemarqué provides a prose French translation, which also includes 'stage directions'. He supplies the melody and accompanying first verse sung by the *bazvalan*:

LA DEMANDE EN MARIAGE.
(AR GOULENN.)

99

Religiosa.

Eun hau ann Tad holl gal lou dek Ar

meh hag ar Spere-d neu - let Enn

hau ann Tad holl gal - lou - dek Ar

meh hag ar Spere-d neu - let Bennoz ha

Joa barz ann ti - me Muioc'h e -

- vit zo gan - i - me Beu - uoz ha

Joa barz ann ti - me muioc'h e -

- vit zo gan - i - me.

The verse translates as 'In the name of the almighty Father/ The Son and the Holy Spirit,/ A blessing on this house/ And more joy than will ever come to me'.⁴⁸

The *bazvalan* begins, like Cambry's messenger, with blessings on the girl's house. His sadness, he reveals, is due to the loss of his 'dove' which was in his dovecot with his 'pigeon' when a sparrowhawk appeared and frightened her away. This allegorical association of the girl and the dove is maintained throughout the dialogue. From the outset, the bride and groom are identified as belonging to him. They are his birds living on his land, and he is quite rightfully seeking the return of his property. The two poets are 'amis' and address one another with the informal 'tu'.

The *breutaer*'s reply is rather sarcastic, his tone jocular - for a man so distressed the groom's representative is surprisingly sharply dressed - and makes a mocking reference to his well-groomed blonde hair. This response distinguishes the *breutaer*'s verbal style

from that of the *bazvalan*. The girl's champion is half-serious and half-mocking, his intention (perhaps his function) is to produce laughter. His counterpart, who has none of the 'good lines', is serious and unflappable throughout. As we shall see, this distinction, as well as contributing to the theatrical quality of the dialogue, may have a more symbolic meaning.

The *bazvalan*, then, is in no mood for joking; he tells his adversary so and asks again for his dove, receiving a rather exaggerated, emphatic negative in reply. The *bazvalan*, addressing the *breutaer* as 'young man' accuses him of telling a lie; those outside saw her flying next to his yard and landing in his orchard. He receives exactly the same reply as before, suggesting a script-like 'refrain'.

The groom's messenger has witnesses, and his pigeon will die without his mate, and he therefore attempts to enter, in order to search for himself:

Bazvalan

Ma c'hudon vo kavet maro,
Ma na zeu ked he far endro;
Mervel a rei ma c'hudon baour:
Me ia da welet dre aun nour

Breutaer

Harz! ma mignon, na iaffec'h ket,
Me ia ma unan da welet...

[My white pigeon will be found dead,
If her mate does not return;
He will die, my poor pigeon:
I will look behind the door.

Stop, my friend! You cannot enter,
I will look myself...]⁴⁹

This is highly dramatic; the *bazvalan* makes explicit reference to the boundary separating them, and his intention to cross the threshold, rather than merely 'go inside'. In his insistence and attempt to enter, we recall the threat of forced entry by those carrying the dowry-chest in the *Fest Ann Arvel*.

The girl's champion goes inside for a moment, then returns with the news that he has found no dove, but a number of flowers in the garden. These represent the different female family members or friends 'available' or hidden inside. Villemarqué's 'stage directions' indicate that the *breutaer* 'returns a moment (or instant) later'. This suggests that he merely hid behind the door for a few seconds, that he has not actually been anywhere. He again enters the house and returns - after an unspecified period of time - with a young girl. These two exits and reappearances could have been combined, as they are in Cambry's version, but here the intention is clearly an even further prolongation of entry, an extension of the time taken to accomplish the dramatic action of the ritual.

The young girl is led by the hand to the doorway. After praising her, the *bazvalan* delivers the gentlest of refusals; if his 'pigeon' were a dewdrop he would water the 'rose'. We may read this as a testing of the messenger's verbal skill; in order to make a suitable reply, with the meaning 'the groom does not want her', the *bazvalan* speaks of his charge in terms of flora rather than fauna, perhaps because linking 'pigeon' and 'rose' in the allegory would be rather more difficult. It may be that being challenged by his counterpart to change the term of reference is part of the test. This is perhaps part of the fun; commentators refer repeatedly to the improvisational character of the exchange, and it may be that the ability to shift between different allegorical references was an indication of

superior skill.

After a dramatic pause, the *bazvalan* again tries to enter, this time saying he will go up to the attic to search for his 'dove'. Again the girl's champion tells him to stay while he goes to look himself. He returns with 'the lady of the house', presumably the bride's mother. He has no dove, but 'an ear of corn left over from the harvest', which, it is suggested, the messenger might put in his hat as consolation. This may be a reference to a harvest custom, related to that of the *cailleach* or 'old wife of harvest'. The last sheaf, fashioned into a 'corn-dolly', is given to the person or team last to finish their particular strip or field, and is kept by them until the next harvest. Ronald Black describes the resulting shame; 'It was feared and resented. If it was served on you and you could not legitimately get rid of it, you became its keeper, and responsible for *gort a' bhaile*, any dearth that might befall the township'.⁵⁰ It was believed that its keeper would lose stock, face starvation and had married an unchaste spouse. In South Uist the *cailleach* was given a married woman's headdress 'to show it was non-virgin', and perhaps this is the link being made by the *breutaer*. The *cailleach* 'represents the used corn and the dust of the quern, all shown [sic] and processed as is necessary for life and regeneration'.⁵¹ In other words, the lady of the house 'well fulfilled her task in the world', and 'has finished what the other should begin' as Cambry's messenger remarked when presented with, and refusing, an old woman. Following this theory, the bride can be seen as equivalent to the *maighdeann*, the virgin, who represents 'fresh corn, ripe, wholesome and ready for consumption'.⁵² This may explain the *bazvalan*'s stressing of the bride's fertility in his reply: 'as many grains as an ear of corn has, as many little ones will my white dove have'. Harvesting was a

competitive activity between those not only of the same community, but also of neighbouring regions, where the battle was for the blessing of the saint Gelvest (Saint Servais) who was the patron of growing corn and protected against early frost. The 'Pardon' (Saint's feast-day) was held in Arré on May 13 and attended by thousands of pilgrims from Tréguier, Quimper and Vannes. A bloody battle for the saint's banner and statue ensued:

On the eve men arrived on horseback armed with thonged cudgels... After the *Magnificat* the cudgels were raised and the church resounded with a clashing of forces. The Cornouaillais shouted, 'Drive away the frost! Give us wheat in Cornouaille.' The people of Vannes shouted, 'Wheat, oats, and buckwheat to the Vannetais.' Each side wished to secure the banner and statue which would bring them abundant harvests. Women fought tooth and nail at the side of their men... the saint had been smashed to atoms and the women had collected chips in their aprons... our side carried off the banner in triumph. That year the harvest was unusually abundant.⁵³

The *breutaer*'s offer of the ear of corn for the *bazvalan* to wear in his cap can thus be seen as both a mocking symbol of his 'defeat' and lack of vigour, and as carrying a reference to a wider tradition of harvest contests. This would, of course, be more pronounced where the *bazvalan* came from outwith the community.

The messenger's reply to the champion's offer of the 'lady of the house' is again not a refusal as such, but rather more suggestive of a formulaic, stock response. Following the pattern as before, there is another dramatic pause, followed by an attempt by the messenger to enter to 'look in the fields'. The *breutaer* again bars his entry; he will search himself so that his counterpart will not dirty his shoes. He returns with the grandmother, a 'wrinkled apple' whom the *bazvalan*, it is suggested, should feed to his 'pigeon'. She is

rejected with praise and what may be another formulaic response - the maxim-like 'a good fruit does not lose its flavour'. The groom's representative recaps the contest, listing the 'items' which are of no use to him and attempts to enter a final time to find his 'dove'.

In keeping with the friendly, informal and often teasing tone of the dialogue, the *breutaer* then praises the *bazvalan*'s performance, as did the bride's champion in Cambry's example, revealing that he has been guarding the 'dove' in a highly decorated cage. The messenger enters, sits down only briefly (emphasising his ritual presence) and, as in Cambry's account, leaves again to fetch the fiancé. The passing of authority from the fiancée's father to her husband is swift and emphatic; he passes a saddle girth to her new keeper and this is put round the woman as the *breutaer* sings an abduction ballad which reinforces the theme of the passing of childish freedom and liberty of movement and the beginning of adult restrictions. During her transition the bride had been 'guarded' by her champion, who represented parental authority - this responsibility is now passed on. The ballad has a finger-wagging refrain, probably aimed at either the groom or bride, which may have been sung by the assembled company. Again, Villemarqué supplies the melody for the first verse.

LA CEINTURE (AR GOURIZ)

Energico

Gwe - let em euz enn eur flou - ren

Eur ga-zek vi-han, hi la ouen ho! Gra, pa-ri tra,

to, pa ri ti, gra, pa ri gra, pa ri, pa-ri-tra.

I saw in the field a mare full of joy.

- Hark! Do what you will; roof when you build a house; do what you will;
do what you will, do it well.

She thought only of good things, only of frolicking in the meadow;

[Refrain]

Only of grazing green grass and of drinking from the stream.
But on the road passed a handsome young horseman!
So handsome, so strong and so fiery! His clothes glittering with gold and
silver.

And the mare, seeing him, was frozen in awe;
And she came near timidly, and stretched her neck to the fence;
And the horseman stroked her, and placed his head near hers;
And then he kissed her, and that put her at ease;
And then he bridled her, and then he girthed her.

[Refrain]⁵⁴

In addition to the defloration of the bride, the ballad emphasises the exchanging of a carefree youth, characterised by freedom of movement, for a new life of restrictions and control. These, we will recall, were features of the 'delivering the bride' dialogues detailed above, where the bride's new responsibilities were overtly and publicly stated. The refrain in the ballad goes some way to outlining the couple's joint responsibilities.

The ballad ends what Villemarqué calls 'this very primitive ceremony' and the bride's champion asks for the blessings of God, the Virgin, angels and 'all the ancestors, from generation to generation up to her grandfather, at whose feet she is crying'. The weeping, one suspects, is of the ritual, compulsory kind, and the involvement of the dead a recurrent feature of Breton ritual.⁵⁵ The mediator in marriage was therefore also the mediator between the assembled living and the dead:

The dead are not isolated - the voices of the living reach them and

acquaint them with family joys and sorrows. On the bridal night the betrothed should pray at the graves of their deceased relatives whose help had been solicited by the 'Baozolan' or official matchmaker after he had obtained the consent of living kinsmen.⁵⁶

After these blessings the poet proceeds to effectively perform a secular marriage; he joins the couple's hands - a gesture of great import in Brittany, since to hold hands was to broadcast engagement - and rings and vows are exchanged. Then the fiancée, led by the best man, appears on the threshold, her arms braided with silver lace in proportion to the size of the dowry given. This public appearance on the threshold suggests that the 'bridling' and marriage rituals took place inside the girl's house, and that this final moment before she takes her leave is watched by the guests, who have gathered outside again. The method of communicating the value of the marriage portion - the sewing of lace armlets each representing 'milles livres en dot' - can be compared to the public display of the *Fest Ann Arvel* described above.

The fiancé then climbs on a horse held by the *bazvalan* and the *breutaer* 'takes the fiancée in his arms and places her behind her intended'. This is almost certainly an action linked to the ballad; the girl is represented as being placed on the horse and 'carried off' by her fiancé. Describing customs on the morning of the wedding, Brékilien notes 'The fiancée is forcibly lifted side-saddle onto the rump of her future spouse's horse — to simulate an abduction following the oldest tradition'.⁵⁷ He does not, however, suggest what the meaning of this tradition may be. Although she too offers no explanation, Radost notes of Bulgaria that

a number of rites and ritual songs performed at the moment of welcoming the matchmakers in the bride-to-be's home and in leading away the bride

make the wedding a sort of plunder and trading affair with the matchmakers and the bridegroom presented as abductors and buyers.⁵⁸

In her essay 'The Young Abductor of the Locrian Pinakes' Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood notes the differing opinions surrounding the identity of the abductor as depicted on the clay plaques found in the sanctuary of Persephone. Relevant to our discussion is her own conclusion that no particular mythological scene is intended, rather

a marriage theme, the representation of a bride and bridegroom - not, of course, specific persons but, like the statues of victorious athletes, ideal representations of a bride and bridegroom - depicted according to the iconographical model of the Locrian divine bride and bridegroom, Persephone and Hades, whose wedding was preceded by an abduction. I suggest that... such representations were dedicated... by girls who were getting married and sought thus to obtain in their new life the protection of the divinities whose marriage was celebrated... in the cult.⁵⁹

Importantly, the author also argues that the different expressions on the faces of the abducted girls - some startled, some serene - can be explained only 'if the shock and fright of the girl in some of the scenes is not real but pretended, merely ritual'.⁶⁰ In his study Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion Steven Lonsdale observes that during these rituals the martial and the amorous were mingled, with dances of war and courtship expressing the *agon* of the battle of the sexes - an expression of the tension between the two adolescent groups as well as between rival armies. This may also at least partly explain the chases on horseback and games of physical strength associated with wedding custom. Lonsdale observes that 'winning the more permanent social order implied by marriage was predicated on coaxing order from a pre-existing, embryonic order from among the male and female adolescent groups by allowing temporary conflict and disorder to arise from natural oppositions between the sexes among those competing for

the bride'.⁶¹ The social purpose of creating temporary disorder has already been noted in connection with many of the rituals described above. As Lonsdale points out, an important aspect of abduction is that it may be seen as a desire to 'transgress, or at least bypass, the normal order imposed by society at the time of marital union'.⁶² Interestingly, Lonsdale details a poetic account of a wedding procession from the bride's home, our 'fetching the bride' ritual, which was formal but 'accompanied or followed by an informal rout'.⁶³

The disruptive play among the members of the groom's party presents a challenge to the symmetry and solidarity of the all-female procession and is a reminder that the old order must yield to the new, as the bride was removed bodily from her house and transplanted to the... groom's family.⁶⁴

In a conclusion, he observes:

Although actual cases of abduction and rape from festival dances occurred, an explanation for the prevalence of the motif is not to be found in social reality. Its popularity lay in the fact that such a transgression of the normal pattern leading to marriage expressed natural oppositions between the sexes, and aired the conflict between the groom and the family of the bride, who suffer loss at time of marriage.⁶⁵

The motif dramatises the tensions between the sexes, as well as the mutual mistrust which exists between the groom and his father-in-law. Control falls to the hands of the younger generation, who, in failing to conform to social convention and exerting superior physical strength displace the old order. We may compare this to the themes of the transference of 'ownership' from the older man to the younger. The abduction and flight of the groom with the bride is the inversion of the orderly procession to the groom's house, or latterly to the church - a scene still enacted, as we shall see, in Wales last century.⁶⁶ By imitating the flight of the hero-abductor, the young groom also challenges the whole dowry-system and its conceptions of notional equality and the desire to avoid conflict. We note, however,

that rituals of mock-abduction typically take place *after* the marriage ceremony, when such disruptive play is again permitted. The motif stresses the trespassing of boundaries, and we may see it also as dramatising the wrenching of the young woman from one social state to another.

V. Structure of the *Ar Goulenn* and the *Fest Ann Arvel*

The *Ar Goulenn* is consonant with other entry and refusal rites noted in the previous chapter, and shares features of the dialogue during the *Fest Ann Arvel*. Brékilien, the contemporary commentator who provides the *Ann Arvel* dialogue and adds detail to Villemarque's *Ar Goulenn* (without expressing any doubt as to its basic form) notes that the two bards 'engage themselves in a verbal contest, by no means improvised but learned by heart'.⁶⁷ This may contradict the earlier collectors, who remarked on the improvisatory treatment of an invariable theme, and we recall the skilful prolongation of the poets in the *Ann Arvel*, but this may represent a movement towards relying on existing models, as was noted in oral poetic forms of the Austrian *Gasslgehen*. There, young men learned the verbal 'templates' from the older generation of local 'men of words', and knowledge of large numbers of these was highly esteemed. Whilst in the past, as in Brittany, the suitor may have 'employed' the local man of words, these *Gasslgehen* verses were for by-rote performance by the young man himself; there is no suggestion that the creation of an original, or of improvising of one on the spot was considered a superior or even desirable achievement. The 'frame' of the *Ar Goulenn*, Cambry noted, was ancient. His account, however, strikes the modern commentator as over-worked, flowery and unspontaneous.

Villemarqué's is less so, perhaps a result of the jocular tone, the friendly abuse and the precise stage-directions which suggest an eye-witness account. These, however, and the fragment of a song, are all that remain of the verbal evidence, which I believe to be substantially credible. As we shall see, related analogues may help to confirm this. With reference to a pre-existing frame, Tom Taylor's remarks are of interest:

At last comes the wedding day. And now the functions of the 'Bazvalan' and the 'Breutaër', or 'defender', who represents the reluctance of the bride, as the 'bazvalan' the passions of the bridegroom, assume their full importance in the symbolical scene which is transacted in the verses which follow, or in others of the same character, for both Bazvalan and Breutaër may be their own poets, so that [so long as] they adhere to the regulated course of the allegory.⁶⁸

It should not be assumed that an 'educated' text automatically suggests learned forgery. With the *Gasslgehen*, long verses - the longer the better - are memorised, and encompass many genres, epic poetry and ballads among them. Contrary to Brékilien's view, Guilcher makes it clear that memory and improvisatory ability both had their parts to play in the *Ar Goulemn*. In describing dance contests which could last over two hours, he observes:

Like the dialogue songs which were exchanged during weddings between the fiancée's party, shut up in the house, and the party of the fiancé, grouped outside in front of the closed door, where entry could not be gained without his proving his superiority in a repertoire of improvised or memorised subject matter... each tried to eclipse those who had come before and those who were to follow.⁶⁹

One doubts, however, that entry could be refused, at this late stage in events, on the grounds of poetic ability.

Cambry and Villemarqué both have the two poets reconciled at the end of their dialogue, and, especially in Villemarqué's, an atmosphere of friendship and mutual respect

seems to pervade the proceedings. Cambry's observation that such encounters often ended in physical confrontation was noted earlier, and this sits uneasily with the picture of the dialogues as presented. Of the contestatory element Guilcher notes: 'In subject-matter, the sung poetry can assume (or disguise) brutal forms very close to physical combat'.⁷⁰ Perhaps Villemarqué's *breutaer*, who makes sarcastic reference to the clothes and hair of the *bazvalan* is expressing in a decorous way the kind of personal attack delivered more directly in the less elevated, less idealised encounters, more akin to a flyting. Perhaps it is to one of these encounters that Cambry refers in his assertion that violence often followed. An example may be a verse, already quoted, in which the groom's messenger brutally questions his opponent on the girl's virginity - a subject surely most likely to cause ill-feeling between the parties. Certainly, Cambry suggests that this was the *coup de grace* which 'forced his competitor to give up the pretty girl he was defending'. Cambry places this dialogue, however, at a 'first meeting' - after the capitulation, the 'demandeur' commences negotiations - which, on purely psychological grounds, one would have to question. It seems more plausible that this fragment properly belongs to the conclusion of an *Ar Goulenn* dialogue perhaps more earthy in tone than Cambry's more flowery account, and which took place when all discussion has been concluded. Although the outcome of the contest is always the same - entry to the house will be made, a marriage will follow - the object, as Guilcher confirms, is to *defeat* the defender of the girl, in a battle which on one level ritually expresses proper reluctance and due order, but on another functions as a pretext for two bards to pit their wits against each other. In the past, itinerant beggars arriving at the door could expect 'a riddle in verse to which they had

to reply in kind on pain of not receiving any alms'.⁷¹ Perhaps the spirit of this kind of encounter - a little grudging, but mindful of a tradition of hospitality and the avoidance of physical conflict - was applied also to the *Ar Goulenn*. We can recall those examples from the previous chapter in which the bride's father asked riddles of the groom's party, in some cases on the threshold.

VI. The hidden bride

The custom of the hidden bride is found in Brittany, and Villemarqué's *bazvalan*'s reference to those 'shut up' inside the house may be linked to this tradition. A fragmentary text of *Eur zon Eured*, a 'wedding song' from Scaer, describes a 'hidden bride' episode, following a ritual entry. It is in the form of a dialogue between the fiancé and a male representative of his fiancée. Unfortunately, the text is, on occasion, impenetrable. I am grateful to the Breton folklorist Patrick Malrieu for his French translation.

... when a young man is accepted by the girl and her family, he goes to the house of his intended. But she hides herself and the suitor has to find her. Moreover, he knows what it all means, and, on arrival, sings a song of his own composition, of which we give a version:

With her head-dress [covering her from the wind?]
 She is like a turtle-dove
 When she [?] her wings
 My dear turtle-dove is lost
 Do not be afraid [--] people of [Moustoir?]
 When I come at night to your village
 I am looking for my dear one - I am not a thief.

A best-man replies:

Calm yourself young man
 Your pretty sweetheart is not lost

And you ----- as you -----
 Go and look in the house
 Look gently in the *armoire*
 You will hear the sound of wings
 As if she was a turtle-dove.⁷²

Although it is not certain if it is sung on the morning of the wedding, agreement has been reached between the two sides, a search for the girl takes place and the reference may be to a special wedding hood or head-dress. The Breton woman is normally described as wearing some head-piece, but it may be added that in this case it causes the singer to think of a turtle-dove - suggesting a change in the girl's normal appearance. The young man is clearly from outwith the fiancée's village, and his reassuring 'I am not a thief' may be a formulaic element. The reply of the girl's representative 'Calm yourself, your sweetheart (again a dove) is not lost' closely resembles the replies noted in Cambry and Villemarqué's *Ar Goulemm*, and provides some degree of confirmation as to their genuineness. We may also note the invitation to enter and, absent in the two early accounts, evidence that the girl could be actually hidden inside a chest or wardrobe and the fiancé charged with finding her. If this 'armoire' is the dowry-chest which forms the physical centre of the ritual dialogue *Fest ann Arvel*, then its arrival at the groom's house may be even more closely identified with the person of the bride herself, and the dialogue further confirmed as a 'replaying' or 'prefiguring' of the entry ritual on the morning of the wedding, depending on when the *Fest* takes place. The young man, it is to be noted, 'is, moreover, aware what it all means'; a further reference to the game-like nature of the ritual, a degree of complicity we have previously noted. In this song, collected in the late 19th century, the fiancé himself has taken over the role of the *bazvalan*; he has come at night (as Bodénés

describes the matchmakers above) and negotiated entry, which may indicate the emergence of a later version of the custom where the 'fetching of the bride' was done by the fiancé himself. His intended, however, still plays only a passive role; she is hidden and represented by proxy. In describing the custom, Brékélien recounts Villemarqué's description, and, on the *bazvalan*'s return with the fiancé, adds that the young man 'is introduced next to his future bride or, if the custom demands that she is hidden, goes in search of her', indicating that the 'hidden bride' component was not universal. Only in Plougoulm, it seems, did the bride carry the steps of ritual resistance still further; she slept wearing three skirts, removing one each following night.⁷³

VII. Delivering the bride ('La Soupe au Lait')

Another wedding song, sung on the night of the wedding when the couple partake of the milk-soup together, would appear to summarise the day's events, as well as being a further reminder of the bride's new state. Published by Abbé François Cadic in 1925, it begins with the young man's arrival at the girl's home to lead her away. The author supplies the melody for the first verse:



To know your feelings and to tell you of mine
And to tell you of mine,
I have come to your home.

Follow me now to my land, young girl,
 Now, young girl,
 Ah yes! If you are willing.

Farewell to my friends and all the young folk,
 For I have to leave everything
 To stay with one alone.

So today, young girl, your name was changed
 For yesterday you were *damzel*
 Today you are *madam*.

Today, young girl, you were given a ring,
 When you looked upon it
 Your tears trickled down

When you looked upon it, your tears trickled down
 The one who gave it to you
 Is the one who will comfort you.

So today, young girl, you were given a bouquet
 After showing everyone
 That you are a woman in marriage.

So today, young woman, you were entrusted with a wreath
 After proving to the people
 That you were a maiden as it should be.

The wreath shines, it swings to and fro in the wind,
 Like your heart, young girl,
 In changing its position.⁷⁴

The song reminds the bride of her new status, the rituals she has undertaken in bringing it about, and emphasises the presence of witnesses to the whole ceremonial sequence. Particular stress is laid on her virginity, the 'troubled' nature of her decision (i.e. torn between father and groom, youth and adulthood), that this decision was arrived at voluntarily, and the changing of her name and title - she is addressed as 'girl', then as

'woman'. We can usefully compare this to the 'delivering the bride' ritual dialogues discussed above, where the same elements formed the basis of the bride's public broadcasting of her consent to undertake a new regime and allegiance. We may also note the reference to ritual weeping and the 'correct' person to turn to for comfort - her new husband, whom she has followed to his 'country'. The bride's journey to a 'distant land' is, of course, a feature of the ritual laments described above.

The structure of the song itself may be said to suggest if not a ritual dialogue, then a non-monologic, multi-voiced form. The first two stanzas are from the groom's point of view, the third most likely from the bride's, since her movement from the group of unmarried women to the role of loyal companion is heavily stressed in many other examples of these rituals of social relations. The remaining stanzas resemble commentary from the chorus-like assembled guests noted in the Russian laments; sung by her female peers, they 'told' or 'recapped' the nature and importance of what the bride was experiencing and what was to be expected of her in the future. This public, step-by-step 'replaying' of the day's actions may well have been a dramatised, sung dialogue, with proxies taking the roles of bride and groom as in the Russian laments. The rapid shifting of 'voices' seems to provide some support for this interpretation. It may also have been quite extended; the sung commentary accompanying the eating of the milk-soup (which contains croutons threaded together and which the couple have to eat with a single perforated spoon) consisted of no less than twenty-three couplets. The singers, according to Brékilien, claimed that they had 'come to comfort a heart in pain, the heart of a young girl on the first night of her marriage'.⁷⁵ As they ate, mocking chants were sung, and we

may recall that the Russian bride's fortitude was also tested by insults which she had to silently ignore.

VIII. Lying contests

One aspect of the two versions of the *Ar Goulemn* yet to be discussed is the probable inclusion of a boasting or lying contest. At the conclusion of his account, Cambry defines the bride's champion as 'a kind of Matamore who speaks with his [Matamore's] voice, identifying himself with the one whom he offers his hand, telling only of heroic deeds'.⁷⁶ This appears to refer to the reconciliation of the two poets, when they shook hands. The bard's exploits are indeed remarkable:

In days of old he killed a thousand philistines with the jawbone of a donkey, the walls of Babylon were destroyed by him, he entered Troy with the help of a wooden horse, he commanded the Persian army when they seized Athens, for the Romans he won the famous battle of Cannas, he was the victor of Pavie... learning is superior to the strength of weapons... I received the law from On High, on the top of Mount Sinai; I retrieved the Scriptures, lost in the conquering of Jerusalem; I will sing in my verse of the exploits of the Trojans and let myself be called 'Homer'; in Sicily I composed the verses which are attributed to Theocritus, I was Virgil in the service of Augustus; after that, being kind Thibaut, formerly Earl of Champagne, I made verses, and my last were those which are attributed to Ronsard.⁷⁷

Cambry presents this rather confused picture as a monologue, and it is not clear at what stage of the dialogue, if any, it took place. Villemarqué, however, gives a version in dialogue form:

a curious detail relating to the two rival poets, and fallen into disuse... from the beginning, the 'demandeur'... poses as an important person... 'It is I, he says, for example, it is I who was Samson and killed the Philistines;'

and he embellishes this rough sketch. The 'avocat' of the young girl replies: 'learning (or knowledge) is greater than the force of arms: it is I who received the law from God on Mount Sinai. I am Moses; it is I who retrieved the Scriptures, lost in the taking of Jerusalem; it is I who composed the verse which is attributed to Theocritus. I was Virgil in the service of Augustus', etc.⁷⁸

Villemarqué points out that this boasting took place 'from the beginning', although, like Cambry, he gives no indication as to how or if it was integrated in the dialogue itself. As these two accounts stand, it seems unlikely that the boasting exchange could follow the general blessing of the threshold and company, since this greeting leads seamlessly to the 'lost animal' allegorical exchange. Boasting would most naturally precede the contest, but such an exchange taking place before ritual greetings, even if considered as quite separate from the *Ar Goulemn*, is again difficult to imagine. It may be that both Cambry and Villemarqué were aware that a boasting exchange formed part of the bardic contest, but were unable to integrate it. Villemarqué is at pains to tell us of his sources and eyewitness account of the *Ar Goulemn* - but gives no evidence, other than Cambry, for the boasting or lying contest. He explains the origin of the bards' flamboyant claims:

At first sight, this comparison of the poet to figures from antiquity appears bizarre, but one is even more astonished hearing that Taliesin, who believed in metempsychosis, used the same language and said quite seriously: 'It is I who gave Moses the power to cross the river of Jordan; I saw the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. I was the standard-bearer of Alexander. I know the names of the stars from the West to the East... Knowledge is worth more than might.' Would the popular poet not copy the bard?⁷⁹

Cambry remarks of the boasting: 'These verses were, no doubt, composed by some parish priest; they lack the originality of the first, but are replete with modern forms; the structure

may be of great antiquity.⁸⁰ One is inclined to agree with Cambry on this point. Both he and Villemarqué were, however, notorious 'improvers' of the material they collected, and it may be that the 'parish priest' was none other than Cambry himself. Baring-Gould remarks of Villemarqué, 'later investigators found that the well-intentioned man had "restored" whole ballads from surviving fragments and used, in good faith, the contributions of another "faker" of the antique'.⁸¹ This may well be a veiled reference to Cambry, whom, as we have seen, Villemarqué cited as further proof of the structure of the *Ar Goulemn*, and to whom he makes repeated reference in his Barzas Breiz.

IX. Post-wedding drama

We noted earlier the connection between the term *bazvalan*, broom, and images of fertility. In Morbihan, this finds overt expression in a ritual drama performed, depending on locality, sometime between the first and third days after the wedding. It is particularly well-developed in the north-west, the most inaccessible area of an already isolated region. The bride accompanies the matchmaker, who is grotesquely dressed as a horse or a goat, and is led by a man with a whip, and they visit from house to house, 'especially to those where young women were living'.⁸² Several of the terms denoting 'matchmaker' in these locations - *marh-dimiao* (horse of marriage), *jao-allians* (horse of alliance), *gaor*, *bouh-gaor* (goat, billy goat) clearly attest to this custom. Comic scenes were improvised, and evidence suggests ritual dialogue played a part, although no texts survive. At the doorway, the matchmaker chanted a verse 'composed especially to ask them to come near' and to which the girls replied, attempting to persuade the matchmaker to remove his mask and so

discover his identity. After a long period he consented, and 'the young women came to embrace and cajole him. They asked him to be their 'goat' at the first opportunity. This he promised, on one condition, that the interested party taste his cakes, and they tell him the name of the lucky boy they were interested in.⁸³ There followed a chain dance with the goat or horse and the bride leading, which signalled both the end of the drama and of the wedding festivities. There was a general rush for the matchmaker's sweets, which was resisted by the representatives of the groom who 'armed with sticks, endeavoured to defend the actor until their last breath, then abandoned him to the plunder'.⁸⁴ As Guilcher points out 'horse, billy-goat or goat, are animals readily associated with the idea of generating power' and this fertility figure is closely associated with the bride. She must dance with him, and as the final ritual in a sequence celebrating her fecundity and the creation of a new family, the fertilising power which brought about her marriage is extended to the community's unmarried women, who must eat the cakes the matchmaker offers 'to obtain a husband'. In what is perhaps a later custom, in Plougastel the distribution of cakes or sweets was carried out by the bride, as indeed wedding cake is commonly handed to the guests in our times. The bride is barred from leaving the village by a ribbon garlanded by flowers which she must cut to get through; she then distributes sweets among the women who held the ribbon.⁸⁵ We might consider this as a dramatisation of the bride's defloration, necessary for conception and the creation of a new family. Such 'barrier' customs are, of course, very common among diverse peoples, these obstructions also often linked with a 'battle of the sexes' or a show of territorial hostility by the group losing one of their members.

We may read this post-wedding 'fertility' dialogue as the *Ar Goulemm* 'replayed' in reverse; on the wedding morning, a verbal contest takes place where the matchmaker attempts to overcome a girl's reluctance to make herself visible, to come out of hiding; here, the girls, through their verbal skill and persistence, try to persuade the matchmaker to reveal himself, overcoming *his* supposed reluctance. The bride's appearance, one might say the lifting of the veil, sets in motion the process of procreation. The 'unveiling' of the matchmaker more or less guarantees future unions among those who absorb his potent influence. Again, as with the *Fest Ann Arvel* and the *Ar Goulemm*, the dialogue takes place at the threshold in front of an audience; the wedding entourage and the wider community, who use this occasion to indulge in a 'battle of the sexes', the males trying unsuccessfully to 'prevent' the matchmaker from losing all his highly-charged 'sweets' to the female aggressors. In the *Ar Goulemm* the contest is 'fixed' so as to produce victory for the male principle; on this occasion, victory for the female principle is assured. In both cases the motivation is the same; the creation of a family with eventual progeny, the condemnation of celibacy and an affirmation and accretion of the fertilising powers central to the health and continuation of both family and community.

X. Conclusion

Breton rituals of entry, prolongation and refusal are consonant with those described in Chapter One, with a 'fetching the bride' and 'delivering the dowry' type dominant, with the addition of a ritual drama as part of the post-wedding festivities. There may also have been a ritual exchange on the occasion of the incorporation ritual of eating milk-soup, on the

wedding night immediately before the couple are put to bed, but there were no concrete indications of dialogic form in the wedding songs examined. A significant feature of the Breton tradition is the identity of the ritual expert or experts, described as professional or semi-professional bards. More than a talented or revered relative, or locally acknowledged 'man-of-words', the Breton matchmaker has the status and freedom of movement accorded to the Celtic herald and bard.

The forward movement from first meeting to *guenedel* or *Ar Weladem*, then betrothal and marriage is clearly delineated. At the first two meetings, the matchmaker is mediator and negotiator for the young man's interests and deals directly with the girl's family. Although in earlier times a more pronounced caution may have necessitated indirect formulas, contemporary evidence indicates that at least in recent centuries, these do not play a part at this early stage. Verbal skill, although clearly prized in the matchmaker's art, is centred on informal eulogy as part of a 'game' which is acknowledged by both parties.

At the following *Fest Ann Arvel* and *Ar Goulem*, the matchmaker now appears as a fully fledged bard, facing a rival representing the girl's family. This adversary would appear to be 'employed' for this purpose alone, since he does not appear to perform any other function. A traditional framework provides the opportunity for a bardic contest conducted in the open air, and enables the poet to display his rhetorical armoury to the full; indirect praise, eulogy, invective, conspicuous learning, boasting, lying and flying all play a part. The suggestion that physical conflict was a regular feature suggests that the contest was taken quite seriously - a battle for prestige and honour between two rivals.

This battle is simultaneously connected and separate from the context in which it occurs; the age-old conflict of families and male and female principles is articulated, but is also a pretext and platform for individual verbal display and communal mirth. As the status of the couple undergoes change, so the poets are given the opportunity of redefining their own positions in the community or region. One commentator noted the common use of two matchmakers, which raises the interesting possibility of a ritualised encounter in which, for example, one bard might adopt the serious role of accomplishing the stated objective, following the 'script', whilst the other would provide the comic elements, and so community involvement, through sarcasm and insult.

Once the *Ar Goulenn* is concluded, the bard effectively marries the couple. It is of significance that the word *dimézi* denotes both 'betrothal' and 'marriage', and the clear indication is that at one time bards officiated at secular marriages. His important, one might even say mystical, standing in the community is also confirmed by his being entrusted with the invocations which summon and secure the approval of the ancestors of the couple and in his personifying the spirit of fertility brought to the fore on the occasion of a marriage. Tailors, cited as the most common matchmakers, occupy a lowly status (Cambry described them as 'méprisés'), and a matchmaker, according to Taylor, could be 'often a wandering man, at once bard and beggar, but always treated with respect.'⁸⁶ There is some evidence that the dialect word *guenille*, indicating 'a ragged figure', is linked with *guenelle*, 'matchmaker'. The rootless, wandering beggar-bard is both part of and outside society, and his liminal status, verbal skill and inside knowledge makes him the obvious choice for prosaic mediation between two families as well for poet-priest and mystical

intermediary between the living and the dead. His delicate negotiating skills give way to rhetorical virtuosity, then to ritual expertise. This combination of the lofty and the low - and in this we include dressing in a goat's skin and being whipped - is of some interest and will be explored further. One can postulate the movement from a tradition where a higher-ranking, static bard would carry out the rituals most commensurate with his status - the display of rhetorical skill, the marriage ceremony and ancestor dialogue as well as the fertility drama. This tradition gave way to the employment of a lower-grade itinerant bard who in everyday life made his living travelling from door-to-door. The association of this marginal man-of-words, endowed in the popular imagination with a certain mystical vision and a mobile worker such as a tailor is reasonable. Folk culture is replete with wily, magically endowed tailors who feature in many tales and legends. In later times only the matchmaking skills survived, these being carried out by established local figures such as millers and publicans. The dialogues, formerly improvised, were then memorised and performed by those who were appointed masters-of-ceremonies, these finally replaced by communal songs which retain the vestiges of dialogic structure, pared down to their essential elements. There are clear indications that the horse/goat visiting custom took the form of a ritual drama with traditional dialogue, although no text survives and the main focus of the custom as collected by Guilcher in the late 1950s and 60s is the dance and the distribution of the cakes and sweets. One might say that the custom has become mute, the same tendency observable in the ritual dialogues detailed in Chapter One, where extended and developed exchanges noted in one region had been reduced to the swopping of monosyllables ('Open' - 'Pay') in another.⁸⁷ On the status and function of the matchmaker

Guilcher observes:

It is interesting... to observe, in Morbihan especially, the decline that has occurred in the former function of the 'darboder' in recent times, and the change in signification which has resulted for the ancient symbols of his mission. Before becoming goat or horse of alliance the 'darboder' performs in effect the function of master of ceremonies, charged with leading the procession... his insignias were a ribbon, often of lace, which he wore in his hat... and especially a staff copiously decorated in ribbons which he held in his hand... but this ceremonial staff became more and more a defence against assailants, the ribbons no more than a piece of decoration like any other.⁸⁸

Notes

1. Jean-Michel Guilcher, 'Culture Paysanne de Basse-Bretagne' Arts et Traditions Populaires I (1967): 16-17.
2. Jean-Michel Guilcher, 'Un Jeu des Mariages en Basse Bretagne', Arts et Traditions Populaires I (1967): 81, trans. NM.
3. Jean-Michel Guilcher, La Tradition Populaire de Danse en Basse-Bretagne Monton, 1963: 45, trans. NM. My italics.
4. Expressions of ridicule include saying that he had 'reçu son sac... de blé noir' [got his sack of black corn] or 'plein son chapeau d'avoine' (eun tokad kerh) [had his hat filled with corn], or he was 'un taureau tacheté' (eur hole briz) [a mottled bull].
5. Yoenu Bréklien, La Vie Quotidienne des Paysans en Bretagne au XIXe siècle. Rennes, Hachette, 1966: 158, trans. NM.
6. L.M. Bodénès, Plougastel-Daoulas, Ses Villages, Ses Traditions Brest: De La Cité, 1978: 293.
7. Le Roux 37, trans. NM.
8. Cambry, Voyage dans Finistère en 1794 1st ed. Vol 2: 51, trans. NM.
9. Pierre-Jakez Hélias The Horse of Pride: Life in a Breton Village trans. June Guicharnaud (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1975) 290.
10. Kevin Danaher, Gentle Places and Simple Things (Cork: Mercier, 1964): 10. Van Gennep only identifies tailors as the matchmakers in one region of France, Orthevielle, but it may be that it was not just the Bretons who called upon their services so frequently. Manuel I: 354n.
11. Le Roux: 37, trans. NM. One elderly informant, however, points out 'I never needed go-betweens, I had a good bike!' (41).
12. La Roux: 38, trans. NM. She adds, however, that not all girls had the right to go to these events.
13. Le Roux: 38, trans. NM. Lucy Mair notes '... if the side that has taken the initiative in proposing the match has second thoughts, he can make this known without giving the offence that would be caused if the two fathers were to meet face to face. Lucy Mair,

Marriage (London: Scolar Press, 1977): 90.

14. Bodénés: 293, trans. NM.

15. Hélias 290-91.

16. Vicomte Hersart de la Villemarqué, 'Les Chants des Noces' Barzaz-Breiz: Chants Populaires de la Bretagne. 5th ed. (Paris: Perrin, 1867) n.pag.

17. Brékilien: 159, trans. NM.

18. Le Roux 37

19. Le Roux 38-9, trans. NM.

20. Bodénés: 294, trans. NM.

21. 'Baz, baguette, *balan*, de genêt.' Villemarqué, 'Les Chants des Noces', Barzaz-Breiz. cf Brékilien: 159.

22. Villemarqué, 'Les Chants des Noces'. n.pag, trans. NM.

23. Cambry 247, trans. NM.

24. Horse of Pride 56.

25. Danaher 22-3.

26. Villemarqué 480, trans. NM.

27. Lowry Charles Wimberley, Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1928; New York: Dover, 1965) 351. The broom appears in many 'plant burdens'.

28. Cambry 247, trans. NM. The verb 'accorder' means 'to bestow someone's hand in marriage' as well as 'to concede, to bring into harmony or accord, to make agree, to reconcile, to grant.' Giving up the girl to marriage is thus the same as giving up the battle.

29. 'Les Chants des Noces' n.pag., trans. NM.

30. Tom Taylor, Ballads and Songs of Brittany (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, n.d.) 165. The work is a selection of translations from Villemarqué's Barzaz-Breiz.

31. Bodénés 294.

32. Bodénés remarks that the couple are considered united once they have drunk from the same glass. He is referring mainly to Plougastel. This is confirmed by Brékilien, who adds other examples:

Plougastel White bread and strawberry brandy brought to the table and the couple must eat with the same knife and drink with the same glass.

Lannion The fiancé puts his knee on the girl's apron.

Penthièvre Young man pours money on his fiancée.

(Brékilien 160)

33. Brékilien 160, trans. NM.

34. Brékilien 160, trans. NM. He adds 'These days, when the betrothal is not so solemn, it (*dimézi*) has only the second sense (ie 'marriage'). There exists another word, *eured*, but this corresponds to the French 'wedding'.

35. 'La Demande en Mariage.' n.pag., trans. NM.

36. The *bombarde* is a small, oboe-like shawm with a penetrating sound used widely in Breton music. It is fingered like a tin-whistle. It is often played with the *biniou*, whose chanter plays an octave above it, and whose drone is an octave below.

37. Brékilien 162-3, trans. NM.

38. Dömötör 54

39. Villemarqué, 'Chant de la Fête de L'Armoire.' n.pag., trans. NM.

40. Villemarqué, 'Son Fest ann Arvel' n.pag., trans. NM.

41. 'Renfermer' means 'shut up, conceal, comprise, include' as well as 'conceal'. In view of the nature of the ritual, 'shut up' or 'conceal' seem the most appropriate translations.

42. Cambry 162, trans. NM.

43. Cambry 163-4.

44. As well as 'perplex, trouble and confuse', 'troubler' can also mean 'to muddle, agitate, disturb, annoy, dim, dull, ruffle, disconcert.'

45. Cambry (1795) 161-8.

46. Cambry (1795) III: 52.

47. Villemarqué, 'Les Chants des Noces'. n.pag., trans. NM.

48. All English translations are based on Villemarqué's French.

49. Villemarqué, 'La Demande en Mariage' n.pag. trans. NM.

50. Ronald Black, 'The old wife and the crippled goat,' West Highland Free Press 23 Oct. 1987. Ways of disposal included 'donating' it to another community (with attendant violence if discovered), possible removal by a visitor in return for hospitality, fed to the animals at New Year, or destroyed by the goatskin clad guisers of New Year's Eve. A highly-detailed survey of diverse 'corn-dolly' customs may be found in Frazer's Golden Bough 'Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild, I: 131ff.

51. Ronald Black, 'The Harvest Maiden,' West Highland Free Press, 9 Oct. 1987.

52. *ibid.*

53. S. Baring-Gould, A Book of Brittany, London, Methuen, 1932: 58-9. The account is from 'an elderly countess, who made the pilgrimage barefooted from Quimper on seven occasions'.

54. Villemarqué, 'Les Chants des Noces' n.pag., trans. NM. A version of another Breton abduction ballad may be found in E. Wingate Rinder, 'Gwennolaik', The Celtic Year I (n.d., c.1900) 30-34. The text is in English and appears to have been much 'improved' by its editor.

55. For the cult of the dead see Nicolai, En Bretagne (1893) and Anatole Le Braz La Legende de la Mort (1892) in Baring-Gould, 17-18.

56. Le Goffic, Sur La Côte (1897) in Baring-Gould, 19. 'Baozolan' so spelt. I have come across no other instance of this spelling.

57. Brékelien 164

58. Radost 73.

59. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, 'The Young Abductor of the Locrian Pinakes', Institute of Classical Studies 20 (1973): 14.

60. Sourvinou-Inwood 16. The author also makes reference to the mock-abduction which

formed part of the wedding ceremonies of Sparta, and interprets this as having a mythological projection. The portrayal of the lifting of the bride on to the nuptial chariot is also linked with this mock-abduction ritual; 'the Athenian bride did not mount the nuptial chariot, but was lifted and deposited in it' (17).

61. Steven Lonsdale, Dance and Ritual play in Greek Religion (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 207.

62. Lonsdale 207.

63. Lonsdale 213.

64. Lonsdale 214.

65. Lonsdale 223..

66. There may also be a link with the Scottish tradition of 'riding the brooze' or 'braize', a post-wedding horse-race back to the young couple's (typically the young man's) home. See Margaret Bennett, Scottish Customs from the Cradle to the Grave (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992) 158-162.

67. Brékilien 164

68. Taylor 166. From the notes accompanying his translation of Villemarqué's text.

69. Guilcher, 'Culture Paysanne': 16.

70. Guilcher, 'Culture Paysanne': 16.

71. Guilcher, 'Culture Paysanne': 16.

72. Alfred Bourgeois, Chansons Bretonnes Inédites 2nd series, Brest: n.p. (1896): 63. I am grateful to the Breton folklorist Patrick Malrieu for his French translation. Trans. NM. A comment by Bourgeois reads 'I had the melody of this song and the first couplet from M. Rodallec, from Scaer, and I added the second (20 September 1895).

73. Brékelien 164

74. Abbé Francois Cadic, 'Les Cadeaux de Mariage', Paroisse Bretonne de Paris I (1925) n.p., Trans. NM. The nosegay is attached to the bride's bodice, the 'wreath' encircles her forehead.

75. Brékilien 168.

76.Cambry 1st ed. 167.76.

77.Cambry, 1st ed. 167-8. Ronsard was a French poet of the late renaissance.

78.Villemarqué 'Les Chants des Noces' n.pag.

79.Villemarqué, op.cit.

80.Cambry, 1st ed. 168.

81.Baring-Gould 121.

82.Guilcher, 'Un Jeu de Mariages' 82. Those informants Guilcher names were born between 1870-1900.

83.Guilcher, op. cit. 82.

84.Guilcher 82.

85.Bodénés 295.

86.Taylor 173.

87.I am grateful to Dr Emily Lyle for suggesting the term 'mute'.

88.Guilcher, 'Un Jeu de Mariages' 85.

Figure 2



J. Havell sculp.

THE BIDDER.

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Chapter Three

Wales

I. Introduction

In Wales, the entry ritual of exchanging verses in the form of a verbal contest is a feature of both the seasonal visiting custom associated with the *Mari Lwyd* and with weddings where, as in Brittany, it took place on the occasion of 'fetching the bride'.

As in Brittany, it is clear that the bards were involved in the solemnisation of marriages. Villemarqué describes the bardic role in Wales:

One will have noted the role the popular poet plays in the nuptial ceremony; we have seen that the ancient bards figured in marriages: it was without doubt one of the attributes of their primitive sacerdotal character; Welsh law gave them a double role in the procedure at weddings. In the fourteenth century, they still blessed unions. Dafydd ap Gwylim informs us that he was married by his friend the bard Madoc Penvraz. This practice has now fallen into disuse among the Welsh; but the main ceremony, the poetic contest between the bards, still took place there a hundred years ago.¹

The 'double role' Villemarqué refers to is the bard's function as both poet and priest, as competitor in a verbal contest and as performer of a spiritual role in the blessing of a marriage. As we shall see, later evidence shows that Villemarqué is mistaken in his belief that the ritual encounter between the bards was present only a 'century before'; that is, in the 1730s. Thomas Pennant, writing about Wales in the late 18th century, noted that 'no public festivity, great feast or wedding could be duly solemnised without the presence of bards or minstrels'. The order he speaks of, the *Pencerdd*, were 'entitled to fees at royal and other weddings' as well as 'a penny out of every ploughland, and a halfpenny out of

every half-ploughland of their district'. This arrangement was 'in order to encourage the *clerwyr* to keep up the language and the memory of the exploits and pedigrees of the Britons'. These qualified bards were subject to rigorous moral restrictions:

They were to be no make-bates, no vagabonds, no ale-house haunters, no drunkards, no brawlers, no whore-hunters, no thieves, nor companions of such... they were prohibited from uttering any scandalous words in speech or whispers, detraction, mocking, scoffing, inventing lies, or repeating them after others, under pain of fine and imprisonment: nor were they to make a song of any person without his consent; nor to enter any house without formal leave first obtained... If they wandered from house to house, they were to be apprehended as strollers and vagabonds, and to be deprived of their *clera* [pay or perambulation]. The *Penbardd* and the *Pencerdd* in their circuits frequented only the houses of the gentry; but if he degraded himself by visiting the commonality, he was only to expect the fee of the common *clerwyr* whose province it was to visit the plebeian houses.²

It is of interest that he must have permission to enter a house, perhaps suggesting that unlawful entry was a problem on a par with drunkenness and other unsanctioned, anti-social behaviour. This is not to say that verbal contest was not part of his trade; he might challenge any other *Pencerdd* 'to rehearse or sing for the prize [at the Eisteddfodd] after giving a year and a day's notice... if he succeeded, he carried it off, if not he lost his degree; and the victor kept the prize for life, but was obliged to produce it annually at the Eisteddfod'.³ Prince Gruffudd ap Conan gives these instructions for a bardic contest in his statute which forms the basis of all Eisteddfodau:

When the congress hath assembled... they shall choose as umpires twelve persons skilled in the Welsh language, poetry, music and heraldry, who shall give the bards a subject to sing upon in any of the twenty-four metres, but not in amoebean carols, or any such frivolous compositions. The umpires shall see that the candidates do not descend to satire or personal invective, and shall allow to each a sufficient interval for composing his englyn (close metre), or cywydd (parallel metre), and music, or other task they shall assign... The successful candidates shall

acknowledge in writing that they are overcome, and shall deliver their acknowledgement to the chief bard (that is, to him who shall win the chair)... and he shall govern them till he is overcome in a future Eisteddfod.⁴

Such competition was also staged for entertainment; in 1176,

Lord Rhys prince of South Wales made a great feast at Christmas on account of the finishing of his new castle at Aberteifi... [he] invited all the bards of Wales and provided chairs for them, which were placed in his hall, where they sat and disputed and sang, to shew their skill in their respective faculties: after which he bestowed great rewards and rich gifts on the victors.⁵

Bardic contest also formed part of the festivities at a royal wedding:

After their nuptial feast, a *Pencerrd* was constituted *cyff clêr* or pillar of the *clêr*, and seated in a chair surrounded by other bards standing, who made him the subject of their merry and ludicrous compositions, to raise mirth in the company. He was that day to make no reply; but on the next, he was to divert the hall at the expence of the inferior bards: and was also to compose a poem upon a subject given him suitable to his dignity.⁶

This last tradition seems designed not only to entertain but to reinforce the distinction between the *Pencerrdd* and lower grades of bard. These may have included the *Datceiniad*, who were 'inferior to bard and minstrel' and would 'sing and play the harp', and 'at the weddings of any of the royal family, his office was to wait on the bride'.⁷ Poets were also patronised by the gentry, and to retain the services of a good bard was a sign of prestige. His position was not always secure; the household bard might find himself engaging in competition in order to remain in his post:

It was the chieftain's ambition, and his honour, that his Bard should be the most eminent of the profession in his power to retain. But as Bards, however harmonious their strains, might not live in harmony with their patrons, or their bardic brethren; the Bard of the household was sometimes obliged to seek a new one, or a rising genius wish to obtain patronage. Where this was the object, the Bard of adventure appearing at

the door of the chieftain whose patronage he sought, challenged the household Bard in verse, either to resign a station of which he was unworthy; or, if he hoped to maintain it, to prove his superiority by a fair trial of skill. If the Bard of adventure was able to reduce the other to silence, or an unequal reply; the station was adjudged to him, and the other sent away.⁸

Contests among the bards were still held in the Tudor period, where in North Wales 'there were still formal sessions of the bards, presided over by the principal local gentry, where singers and poets received their various grades in the bardic order and competed for the honour of the silver harp.'⁹ Elizabeth herself authorised an Eistedfodd at Caerwys in Flintshire, though her proclamation makes it clear that her intention was not so much to preserve the bardic tradition as to remove by selection the 'intollerable multitude' of 'vagraunt and idle persons naming them selves minstrelles, rithmers and barthes', an indication of how blurred the distinction between the trained poet and his unschooled imitators, the 'low wretches' had become.¹⁰ Despite Elizabeth's efforts, competition and interaction gradually lessened the distinction. While the basic ritual function of the bards - praise poetry - remained the poet's main occupation, competition from minstrels resulted in a new emphasis on entertainment and a lighter, livelier style, which appealed to a wider audience. With the anglicisation of the gentry and the dissolution of the monestaries, another source of patronage, the decline of the professional poet was assured, and by the late seventeenth century they had disappeared completely. As Dafydd Johnston points out, however, 'their craft did not die with them... it was preserved by the amateurs of the Classical Revival in the eighteenth century, and was passed on into modern times by generations of folk poets.'¹¹

Contests in verse, certainly, were not only the province of the poets, of whatever rank. An enthusiasm for competitive poetry was shared by the whole community, as Thomas Pennant noted:

Some vein of antient minstrelsie is still to be met with in these mountainous countries. Numbers of persons of both sexes, assemble, and sit around the harp, singing alternately *pennyls*, or stanzas of antient or modern poetry... Oftentimes, like the modern *Improvvisatore* of Italy, they will sing extempore verses. A person conversant in this art will produce a *pennyl* apposite to the last which was sung: the subjects produce a great deal of mirth; for they are sometimes jocular, at other satirical, and many amorous. They will continue singing without intermission, and never repeat the same stanza; for that would occasion the loss of the honor of being held first of the song. Like nightingales, they support the contest through the night... Parishes often compete with parishes: and every hill is vocal with the chorus.¹²

The picture from South Wales a hundred years later is little changed:

Occasional cultural and competitive meetings, such as the one held under the patronage of Gwylim Craig y Tyle at the Rock Inn where Dyfed, (Evan Rees, 1850-1923) future arch-druid, won his first chair, were still held in taverns... On long week-nights in winter, small isolated groups of young people could be seen hurrying to meetings in Old Carno where, for want of a more suitable place, they met in a byre... There was little prior publicity: meetings were spontaneous, but they grew so regular as to be called *Cymulliad y Beudy* (The Byre Gathering). Hours were spent in singing, reciting, debating and composing poetry about sin and salvation especially...¹³

II. The *gwahoddwr*: 'the bidder'

Invitations to a wedding were delivered by 'the bidder', a figure whose skills and appearance match closely those of the Breton *bazvalan*. Peter Roberts describes his necessary qualities:

a person of respectable character, and as well gifted with eloquence and address as could be procured, as on his success the number of guests

depended. He was also to be sufficiently skilled in pedigrees and anecdotes of families, to be able to introduce compliments derived from these sources occasionally. As ensigns of his office, his bonnet and staff were adorned with wedding garlands; and thus arrayed he visited the halls, and other dwellings of the vicinity... his person was respected by hostile clans, as that of a herald... the duty of the bidder, if well performed, reflected as much honour on himself, as profit in his reward, when hired for the purpose.¹⁴

Peter Roberts' illustration of the bidder, which Trefor Owen describes as 'an idealised portrayal' is reproduced in Figure Two. The bidder, like the *bazvalan*, carries a staff, described elsewhere as 'a willow wand, from which the bark had been peeled'.¹⁵ As in Brittany, this identified him as a herald, guaranteeing freedom of movement between 'camps'; Trefor Owen also notes that he was 'entitled to walk into every house unannounced'.¹⁶ A white staff was also the symbol of an officer of the *Gwyl y Cwltrin* (Cwltrin court or feast), local courts where 'the best talkers in the district were appointed as prosecuting and defence councils' and it may be that the bidder fulfilled this function as well.¹⁷ His verbal skill is stressed, notably the ability to praise, and he is required to have a knowledge of genealogy; both bard-like attributes. His task was 'to persuade friends and neighbours to give money or gifts so that the married couple could be given a good start in life. On a later occasion they would themselves return the compliment'.¹⁸

If the bride and groom came from different localities, there might be separate biddings in each.¹⁹ An account book was kept to record all gifts, and it was part of the bidder's job 'in particular to remind those who owed "bidding debts" to the young couple to repay them at the forthcoming bidding'. The economic importance of this was enormous; a servant could expect to receive the equivalent of two or three years' wages.²⁰ The choice of bidder, his reputation based on verbal skill, would have been an essential

part of wedding preparations, and it seems likely that this function was performed by the local bard. Although permitted to enter unannounced, the bidder, like the *bazvalan*, signalled his presence by banging his staff on the floor; a feature which is also, incidentally, shared by the Bulgarian *kalesari* whose invitation was in the form of a ritual dialogue: 'Greetings from Uncle Goshou and Aunt Stana [groom's parents] they invite you tomorrow to a wedding for they are marrying off their 'Toshou' [name] - 'Thankyou!' replied the guest, 'Longlife to those who have sent and those who have brought the news'.²¹ After a bow, the bidder's *rammas* would begin. Although essentially a monologue, Trefor Owen notes that the bidder had to be 'quick-witted with a ready answer', suggesting that the guests responded to his speech in some way.²² He could accompany his oration with a song and a dance, 'so as to bring everybody running to the kitchen in time to see his act and hear the formal invitation with its reminder of the debts', a description which matches closely the merging of styles noted above; genealogy and praise accompanied by a comic turn. Peter Roberts describes his invitation as taking 'sometimes a prescribed form, but more frequently otherwise, and diversified according to the genius of the speaker'²³, others a 'set piece',²⁴ and a 'rhyme specially prepared for the occasion'.²⁵

The role of the *gwahoddwr*; serious and comic, of the community yet with an authoritative, privileged status, can be seen as the Welsh bard's first performance in the ritual sequence of a marriage. Although there is no suggestion he had a matchmaking function, the bidder, like the Breton bard, is entrusted at an early stage with responsibility for ensuring the best possible outcome for the wedding. As the *bazvalan* used his local

knowledge to negotiate terms of land and property, so the bidder's familiarity with community relationships brings about a prosperous beginning for the couple. For both, verbal skill is the tool of their trade, credited with the power of creating the most propitious circumstances for the wedding.

III. The wedding morning

Following the Breton model, the Welsh bard's next role was in the ritual of demanding the bride on the morning of the wedding, a verbal contest Owen terms *pwnco*, a special form of the *canu yn drws*, 'question and answer at the door'.²⁶ Trevelyan describes the scene thus:

Ten or twelve of the bridegroom's friends mounted their horses... and went to demand the bride, in whose home the Gwahoddwr was located. When the bridegroom's procession halted at the house of the bride's parents, one of the party - generally a harpist and bard - delivered lines appropriate to the occasion, and these were responded to by the Gwahoddwr, who remained within. The following verses were composed for a Welsh wedding, and delivered in the orthodox manner.

Bard

Somebody fair is hiding here,
Somebody who to us is dear;
Flowers have we to deck her head,
Roses white and roses red,
And roses pink with never a thorn,
A spray of gorse and ears of corn:
All these blossoms are brought to-day,
Now lead the fair one forth, we pray!

The Gwahoddwr from within replied -

What is this noise? What means it all?
We will not answer a stranger's call;
Unless you tell us what brings you here,
We will give you something to feel and fear!

Bard

We seek a maiden tall and fair,
 With sparkling eyes and nut-brown hair;
 She is the best of maidens many,
 Beautiful, winsome, loving Gwennie.
 We come to claim her as bride to-day,
 So open the doors to us, we pray!

Gwahoddwr

Our daughter is still so young and fair,
 She needs a mother's tender care:
 Go, seek another bride elsewhere.

Bard

But she has been truly wooed and won,
 She shall be his ere set of sun,
 And we must see her duly married;
 Come, come, we have too long here tarried;
 Unless you give her up, we vow
 To burst the door and seize her now.

Then the 'best-man' called out in a tone of authority:-

Silence! let noise and clamour cease;
 We come to win the bride in peace.
 In peace we wish to go our way,
 To have our due, and now we pray
 The bride may come to us today.

The Gwahoddwr unbolted the door, and throwing it wide open, greeted the bridegroom's party. Search was made either then or in the evening, after the wedding festivities, for the bride, who ultimately was discovered under the disguise of a 'granny'.¹²⁷

Despite the rather insipid character of this account, several features common to other examples of the ritual may be noted. The bride is evidently hidden when the groom's party arrive, and they assume that she is hidden, emphasising this as a fixed component of the rite. As in Brittany, her defender affects not to know the purpose of the visit, and refers to

the visitors as 'strangers' - another feature previously noted elsewhere. He then threatens them with violence, a promise to give them 'something to feel and fear', refusing to deliver the bride on the grounds that she is too young. The retort is that prior agreement had already been made, analogous to the *bazvalan's* protest that a deal had been struck earlier that morning and that the *breutaer*, and thus the girl, were breaking a promise.²⁸ This plea for fairness ends with a threat to break down the door and abduct the bride, a concluding episode that appears entrenched in the ritual. Unique to this account, however, is the use of a third party to restore peace and bring about the opening of the door, which is thrown 'wide open', further confirming the whole as an entry ritual. As we may expect, the groom himself does not speak, but, like the bride, he is ritually silent, as she is also hidden or absent, their status liminal, their presence and purpose articulated by proxies. What follows is certainly a 'hidden bride' custom, but rather than, as in Brittany, the bride playing herself, she is disguised as an old woman, perhaps within a group of other 'false brides', from whom the groom must identify his intended. This form of the custom was noted earlier.²⁹

Villemarqué, describing this '*lutte poétique des bardes*', notes its similarity to those of Brittany:

Just as, or just after the fiancé has galloped up to the home of his intended, with the intention of abducting her, those in the house hasten to shut the door; then a bard, detaching himself from the retinue, improvises, as in Brittany, a song to which the other bard of the house responds, and who is not long in being beaten, and seeing the threshold of the dwelling stormed by the strength of his competitor's verse.³⁰

We note here the emphasis Villemarqué places on the groom's party's intention to abduct

the bride, an element of the custom he did not stress in his account from Brittany. Perhaps the Welsh custom was more physical and mock-threatening, and Trevelyan's account would seem to bear this out. It is interesting to notice again the close correlation between the power of words and actual physical strength - a contest in which the girl's bard offers what appears to be only token resistance. As Villemarqué quoted David ap Gwilym as saying, 'Le savoir vaut mieux que la force'; the bards, traditionally unarmed, battled using only the force of their invective.

Trefor Owen's description also suggests the importance of the abduction motif:

The mock poetic contest between those inside the house and those seeking entry... took place on the wedding day, when it constituted a special form of the 'quintain' or ritual hindrance of the wedding, when the 'young man's party' (the *shigowts* or 'seek-outs') came to fetch the bride. Obstacles of all kinds were placed in the farmyard and lanes to prevent access to the house; the door was bolted, and it was there in the doorway, through the closed door, that the contest in verse took place. Local characters who were well-known versifiers sometimes gave assistance in the drawn-out contest which would involve singing several verses and responses, before the door was opened and the visitors allowed in. The 'seek-outs' sometimes succeeded in carrying off the bride on horseback, only to be overtaken on the way to church.³¹

In this account, the bride's resistance begins early, with the barriers extending far beyond the door of the house. Owen describes the encounter as 'drawn-out', a clear prolongation of entry. This is in sharp contrast to Villemarqué's depiction of the bride's defender offering only token, self-consciously ritual resistance. However, the *Fest Ann Arwel*, as we recall, was extended for the entertainment of those in attendance, its length dependant on the poetic skill of the individuals involved. Perhaps Owen's account can be seen as belonging to this tradition. A lengthy encounter may also indicate an older, more fully realised verbal contest, latterly reduced to shorter, more cursory exchanges, a pattern

noted elsewhere. Duration may also be determined by participants' perception of a ritual imperative; in other words, the contest *had* to be of a certain length in order that the bride's party were seen to defend their kinswoman vigorously, and the groom's party obliged in turn to 'prove' their worthiness by articulating a mixture of praise, tenacity and physical strength in order to finally surmount this resistance. Of interest too is the suggestion that more than one bard was called upon to offer his skill, although it is not clear whether there were 'teams' on both sides or only one. There is also a clear indication that, once located, the bride could be taken from her home 'by force' - a very concrete manifestation of the abduction motif.

The 'quintain' was another barrier task which had to be performed before the entry ritual could begin, and Peter Roberts' description of the custom sheds light on this, as well as on other demands and the theme of abduction:

The cavalcade, being all mounted, set off full speed, with the piper playing in the midst of them, for the house of the bride. The friends of the bride in the mean time raised various obstructions, to prevent their access to the house of the bride, such as ropes of straw across the road, blocking up the regular one, &c., and the *Gwyntyn*, (literally the *Vane*), corrupted in English into Quintain, consisting of an upright post, on the top of which a spar turned freely. At one end of this spar hung a sand-bag, the other presented a flat side. The rider in passing struck the flat side, and if not dextrous in passing was overtaken, and perhaps dismounted by the sand-bag, and became a fair object of laughter. The *Gwyntyn* was also guarded by the champions of the other party; who, if it was passed successfully, challenged the adventurers to a trial of skill at one of twenty-four games; a challenge which could not be declined... When these difficulties were over... they hasted to the bride's abode; and if the door was shut against them, assailed it, and those within, with music and poetry, particularly the latter, in strains of raillery. If the latter could not be retorted from within, the door was opened; and, by a little management, the bridegroom's friends contrived to draw the bride out of the company, and bear her off as in triumph. Her friends at a convenient time, discovered their flight and pursued, and, if they overtook the other party, a mock encounter took

place; in which the pursuers acknowledged their own inferiority, and the bride was brought safely to the bridegroom's house, and the whole party received with the greatest kindness and welcome.³²

Roberts' account of this 'ceremony' places the verse contest in the context of a series of other ritual tasks. Indeed, after numerous tests of physical prowess, bringing the groom's party ever-closer to the bride's home, it is verbal skill which is put to the test. An inability to reply signals defeat, a now-familiar 'rule' of engagement. The exchange itself is less a mixture of flattery, praise, persuasion and threat than of simply 'raillery'; emphasising the comic, light-hearted nature of the encounter. This absence of 'bardic' elements - indeed an absence of a skilled verbal exponent at all - is suggested by what appears to be general participation in the contest. The mock-abduction of the bride clearly emerges as the third stage in the ritual. We note the bride's family's customary acknowledgement of their 'inferiority' after yet another mock-battle, akin to the formal conceding of defeat in the Breton *Ar Goulenn*; this is a mock-contest because there can only be one outcome.

Alan Roderick provides an account from Glamorgan and Carmarthenshire where in the late nineteenth century it 'was still a living custom':

The custom varied from place to place but it usually meant forcing the bride away from her friends who would then gallop after her to the church but inevitably arrive too late. At one Glamorganshire wedding in the 1870s more than one hundred horsemen were said to be present. A deputation was chosen from amongst them to ride to the bride's house to formally demand her. They would arrive to find her door securely locked and barred and would then make their demands in the form of Welsh language rhymes to which the people inside replied. Very often a battle of wits developed between the two parties. If those outside recognised the voices of anyone inside they were not slow to mercilessly pillory any personal peculiarities he might possess or ruthlessly satirise any misdeeds for which he might be known in the district. Thus a man charged with sheep stealing found the following rhyme hurled at him:

Gwrandu, leidr hoyw'r ddafad,
 Ai ti sydd yma heddw'n geidwad
 Ai dyna rheswm cloi y drysau
 Rhag dwyn y wreigan liw dydd goleu?

Listen sprightly sheep-stealer
 Are you playing the guardian today
 That's why the doors are locked
 Lest you steal the girl in the light of day.

At last the doors would open and suitable refreshments provided. Afterwards the wedding party would gallop to the church. The bride was then stolen away and carried some distance on her 'kidnapper's' horse but her 'captor' soon returned her to the church where she would be quietly married to her intended.³³

Roderick's account reveals what may be another function of the verbal battle; its use as a licenced opportunity to openly criticise wrong-doers in the community, who are satirised in verse in the presence of large numbers of their peers. Dialogue-songs sung in Ireland at co-operative work meetings could have a similar function; they were 'as a rule very personal in character... but half their attraction lay in the fact that, under cover of the game, the singer could be insulting with impunity'.³⁴ Another feature of the 'game' is the attempt to identify those inside, who have disguised their voices. A correct guess gave those outside the opportunity - one might speculate the right - to sing or chant verses at his expense. The concealment of identity through changing the voice was also noted in the *Gasslgehen*. It follows that those inside were probably not just relatives of the bride, but belonged to a wider group, since such a 'game' could not be pursued for long if those outside had a good idea of their identity already. The abduction episode takes place as the bride arrives at the church - the timing heightens the drama - and is revealed more as a ritual hindering of the occasion as a solitary figure carries away and returns her within a

short period of time.

Mary Corbett Harris provides an account from the south-west:

On the wedding morning it was the custom in south-west Wales for the bridegroom and a party of his friends to call at the bride's house. The leader of the party, the seeker, or *gwyr*, knocked on the front door, whereupon a male relative put his head out of an upstairs window and asked what was wanted. The 'gwyr' then demanded the bride and a verbal battle of wits, often in poetry, followed. Sometimes the bridegroom repeated these lines:

Open windows, open doors
And with flowers strew the floors:
Heap the hearth with blazing wood,
Load the spit with festal food,
The crochon on its hook be placed.

Eventually the 'gwyr' got into the house and a wild search for the bride followed. When at last he found her, they ran off together, mounted on his horse, and galloped off to the church, the bridegroom and the guests careering after them as fast as they could go, just like a pack of hounds after a hunted fox.³⁵

This scene is reminiscent of that of the rather theatrical *Ann Arwel* where the arrival of the groom's party is greeted by a representative at an upstairs window, who asks the reason for their visit. Although represented throughout by the *gwyr*, who is both poet and abductor, it is of interest that the groom is credited with occasionally chanting an entry formula. This is the only example collected for this study in which the groom or bride breaks the ritual silence we have come to expect. The bride is evidently hidden rather than disguised, and the abduction episode in effect delivers the bride to the church, rather than prolonging her journey to it. This may be a rationalisation of the custom or the dramatisation of a situation where abduction is followed by an attempt to marry the girl hastily against her will and without the support of her family.

One early observer notes the 'false' or 'hidden bride' custom the evening before the 'demand':

On the night previous to the wedding, a few of the bridegroom's friends proceed to the bride's house to see if she is safe, when her friends conceal her for a time, either by dressing her in man's apparel, or by putting her in some obscure place; but after some pretended difficulty, she is at length discovered, when they sit down, and, after spending the evening merrily, depart home. Next morning they return again and demand the bride, by repeating several lines of Welch poetry. A kind of refusal is made by her father in a similar kind of poetry; but his consent being at last obtained, the girl is mounted in a horse, behind one of her young male friends, who sets off with her at full speed to the church where the ceremony is to be performed, followed by a numerous concourse of people. The bridegroom is always in readiness to meet her at the church door, with his attendants...³⁶

This is the only example noted in which the ritual seems not only to be in reverse order, but spread over two visits. This is perfectly possible, and the arrival the following morning could amount to a 're-asking' custom, but the explanation that the groom's party are present at the bride's home 'to make sure she is safe' seems unsatisfactory. It is interesting, however, to note that the bride could be hidden *or* disguised, and that it is the bride's father himself who delivers the refusal in verse. Owen provides the following detailed description of an abduction episode from Carmarthenshire:

the bride was mounted on a pillion behind the person acting as her guardian, who, escorted by her friends, together with those of the bridegroom, sets off from the house to the church; but when they arrived at a convenient spot, instead of proceeding to the church, the guardian would set spurs to his horse, and gallop off in a contrary direction... apparently with every intention of carrying off the bride. Upon this, the bridegroom and his attendants, sets off in pursuit, while the other party are no less active in pressing forward to protect the fugitives and prevent their capture; and for the more effective carrying on of this mystery of attack and defence, it is necessary that the whole country should be scoured in every direction, in order that the lanes and highways may be properly occupied by the pursuing party, to prevent the possibility of escape. It was

a matter of principle with the guardian to be constantly endeavouring to effect an escape with his ward... it is scarcely possible to imagine anything more wild and irregular than the various movements of the whole party upon this occasion. When the bridegroom caught the bride, the whole party would gallop away to the church.³⁷

From this evidence and that of other commentators, it will be noted that the identity of the abductor seems problematic.

In another account of the custom, Trefor Owen points out that the task of the *gwyntyn* or *cwinten* faced by the bridegroom's party could refer to both the horse-riding game described above and 'the rope held across the road before the bridal party, a custom which still flourishes in Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire and elsewhere.' His account includes a fragment of an exchange:

When these obstacles were passed the bridegroom's men - a party of from a dozen to a score in number - were prevented from entering the house by the secure barring of the door. To gain admittance they had to win a contest of wits carried on in verse between local rhymesters employed in the service of both parties. The contest might last for several hours... the following were sung at Cardiganshire weddings and some of them, we are told, were used in the eighteen-nineties; the verses were sung (or sometimes recited) by the party in the house (A) and the bridegroom's men (B) alternately:

(A)

Dydd da ich, lân gwmpeini
Pa beth yw'ch neges heddi?
Ai hel eich bwyd y'ch chi ffor' hyn?
Mae bwyd yn brin eleni.

(B)

Fy neges a fynegaf,
Mewn 'madrodd gorau medraf;
Ond brysiais dipyn yn fy hynt
Rhaid cael fy ngwynt yn gyntaf.

(A)

Ai chwi yw teulu'r gorthrwm

Sy'n dod i werthu'r degwm?
A rhoddwch wybod a oes hedd,
Gan fod eich gwedd mor bendrwm.

(B)

'Rym ni yn dod ar neges
Dros fab â chalon gynnes,
I nôl eich Anni lygad lon
Yn dirion hoff gymhares.

(A)

Os soniwch am briodi,
Yr ateb gewch gan Anni,
Fod gofid mawr yn ddigon siwr,
Ynglyn â gwr a theulu.

(B)

Taw sôn, yr ynydd gwirion,
Mae'r ferch yn barod ddigon;
A'r unig un mae e' yn nôl
Yw Anni Dolebolion.

(A)

A fuoch chwi'n awgrymu
I'r bachgen bore heddi'
Fod rhaid cael tipyn o 'scylhaig,
Cyn cadw gwraig a theulu.

(B)

Mae'r mab yn hen ysgoler,
Mae'n ennill arian lawer,
Wryth dynnu glo o fol y graig
All gaw gwraig yn glefer.

(A)

Ni chymer Ann mo'r colier
Sy'n gweithio yn y dyfnder;
Mae'r rhai sydd yno, druain, gwael,
Yn cael damweiniau lawer.

At this point the door is opened

(B)

Wel, tewi rhaid yr awron,

Os ynt yn caru'n ffyddlon,
Mae'n well i chwi gael mynd â'r ferch,
Na siomi serch eich calon.

[Owen's English Translation]

(A)

Good day to you fair company
What's your business today?
Are you begging your way?
Food is scarce this year.

(B)

My business I will state
In terms as plain as I can,
But I have hastened on my journey
And must get my breath first.

(A)

Are you the people of the oppression
Who come to sell the tithe?
Let me know if you come in peace,
As your countenances look so gloomy.

(B)

We are coming on an errand
From a warm-hearted young man,
To fetch your bright-eyed Annie
To be his loving partner.

(A)

If you intend proposing marriage
You will get the answer from Annie
That there is certainly great trouble
In having a husband and family.

(B)

Quiet, you silly fool,
The young woman is willing enough
And the only one that he will have
Is Annie of Dolebolion.

(A)

Did you not suggest
 To the young man this morning,
 That a man ought to be a pretty good scholar
 To keep a wife and family.

(B)

The young man is an old scholar
 And makes heaps of money,
 Drawing coal from the bowels of the earth,
 He can easily keep a wife.

(A)

Ann will not have the collier
 Who works in the depths;
 Those who work there, poor things,
 Meet with many accidents.

(B)

Well, I had better say no more now
 If they love one another faithfully
 It is better that you should take her
 Than disappoint the lover's heart.

On gaining entry the party had to find the bride, who had meanwhile hidden or disguised herself. When she had been discovered she was taken on horse-back by the groom's party in the direction of the church with the bride's 'bodyguard' in pursuit.³⁸

Several features common to other Welsh and Breton examples may be noted from Owen's *pwnco*. Those inside affect not to know the reason for their arrival, and ask if the groom's party are beggars, which is an obvious insult, or hostile 'enemies'. We may read this as a way of acknowledging that they are not ordinary visitors, analogous to the Welsh and Bulgarian bidders striking of their staffs in order to signal the beginning of the 'performance'. Reference is made to their 'gloomy' expression, also noted in the Breton example where the *breutaer* asks the cause of their sadness and points out that their supposed distress is belied by their lively and well-groomed appearance. It may be that

supposed bewilderment on the part of the defenders, a rather theatrical glum or mock-hostile appearance on the part of the visitors and an enquiry as to the cause of it are traditional elements of the 'script'. After an enquiry as to whether they come in peace, those outside praise both the groom and the bride. Cambry's example contained an exchange of eulogies at this point, and the assertion 'the only one he will have/ Is Annie' parallels the Breton 'the one who seeks her is not made for being refused'. Emphasis is placed on the girl's consent, although since this exchange takes place on the morning of the wedding one can reasonably assume that her agreement has already been sought. Such a remark suggests another tactic of resistance, the 're-asking' or 're-playing' of an earlier meeting, as if nothing had been agreed beforehand. The groom's men treat this delaying tactic with contempt; they know she is willing. Reference is made to an earlier meeting that morning, another feature of other accounts, including Camry's where stress is placed on prior agreement. Those outside praise their boy again; he is a miner and able to support a wife. The resistance continues; she will not have a miner since it is such a dangerous job and she may be left widowed. This part of the exchange, and the maxim-like 'there is certainly great trouble/ In having a husband and family' strongly suggest a reference to an earlier, more prosaic discussion of terms, now being 'replayed' and integrated in the dialogue; this would also explain the mentioning of an earlier meeting that morning. Communal acknowledgment of the hard and dangerous life of a miner and his wife brings the exchange to an abrupt conclusion; the bard inside opts to say no more, an example of a formal 'closing' device, noted elsewhere. We may note that her family allow the bride to be taken, rather than actively 'hand her over'. Again, she can be hidden or disguised, and once

found, 'abducted' by the groom's party, pursued by her kinsman or men. Owen makes it clear that the 'rhymesters' were 'employed' by both families, and his observation that the contest could last 'several hours', suggests that those taking part would do so one after the other, each taking his turn at the door. Owen puts the number in the party at between twelve and twenty, and even if only a small number of these were versifiers, it would be impractical to crowd around the doorway and be able to hear the verses delivered by those inside through a closed door. The suggestion is that like the Breton example, there were performers at the door, in Wales perhaps relieved after their muse was exhausted, and others enjoying the spectacle from both outside and inside the house. Such an exchange of extreme length identifies a tradition that goes beyond an entry ritual of prolongation and resistance; marriage presents an opportunity for a public competition between local bards, and, as we shall see, seasonal customs provided another.

Robin Gwyndaf uses the term *pwnco* to describe the ritual exchange of verses at weddings and as part of seasonal customs. He notes that commentators have tended to 'quote a few stanzas of the opening challenge-song and perhaps the essential concluding verse' which suggests that many of the examples detailed above could have been quite extended - perhaps to the extent of Owen's marathon session.³⁹ Although referring to the seasonal *pwnco*, Gwyndaf makes a clear link between the length of the exchange and the poet's prestige, and notes its quality of existing 'over and above' the custom to which it is applied. As we have seen, this could apply equally to the marriage custom:

...farmer JW... near Bridgend, claimed to have been involved in a *pwnco* contest that lasted two and a half hours. More than one singer has put the 'record' at around a couple of hours. At best (at lengthiest) the *pwnco* became something of an end in itself. One has only to talk to such

exponents... to sense the intense rivalry and prestige involved. Among their fraternity at least, the ability to spin a stanza almost spontaneously was highly-prized... the bard is traditionally a revered figure in Welsh culture, his vocation considered synonymous with learning, and as such he could hardly afford a poor showing in the *pwnco*.⁴⁰

On the structure of the custom Gwyndaf points out that 'the general substance of the argument and counter-argument is stereotyped, but within this framework personal variation finds expression - and what the participants seemingly stress is that to link up with the previous stanza is essential in an effective singer.'⁴¹ This ability, we will recall, was described by Pennant in his early description of groups of young people exchanging *pennyl*, sometimes from rival parishes.

Trefor Owen gives a summary of an example of the custom collected in 1894 in Betwys, near Ammanford. I have arranged his summary in a 'dialogue form'.

- The party outside announce that they are messengers sent by the bridegroom to fetch the beautiful young women.
- But there are numerous young women inside of high and low estate, which one do you want?
- We want the one who has promised to become a wife.
- But the young girl sees that you are only pagans - she'd rather stay where she is than take the yoke of slavery.
- But she'd promised to come with her sweetheart to take an oath before the priest.
- A promise of that kind is only binding when she wishes to keep it.
- But the maiden has promised this morning to keep her word that they will both take this bond until death.
- The apostle Paul said it was better to be widowed [i.e. single] than to get married.

- But Paul didn't know the virtues and gifts of women. Solomon and I praise women, so please open the door, and if we do any harm we'll pay for it.

- Since you are so reasonable and your plea so clever, come in to fetch the girl so that she can get married.

In this particular case the bride was handed over amidst considerable celebration, but in other areas she still proved elusive, hiding herself in a chest or cupboard, or even in a grandfather clock - or possibly she had disguised herself as a boy.⁴²

The arrival of the groom's party in this example is a faint echo of those accounts in which the group present themselves as hunters and traders; here they are simply 'messengers', but a certain 'dramatic' quality to their arrival is discernible; they have been sent on a task to fetch a 'beautiful young woman'. The reply gives the first suggestion that a group of women are hidden or disguised inside the house, and the party must choose the 'correct' one. As in previous examples, the bride's family is reminded of a prior agreement; the girl has 'promised' to become a wife. The reply is both an insult and an expression of solidarity; they are pagans, the girl has changed her mind and will remain at home. The next verses are all connected to the promises made by the girl and affirmation of her right to choose. The two sides then turn to scripture, in a display of knowledge in some way comparable to the more lofty exchanges of the Breton bards. The groom's party 'cap' the scriptural allusion offered by those inside, the bard linking himself with a mythical or historic figure, Solomon, a device also noted in the Breton examples. This verse finishes with a plea to open and a promise not to cause damage; perhaps a reference to the enthusiastic search for the bride which will follow. The bride's bard concedes defeat with an

acknowledgement of the skill of his rival, another formulaic element present in many other examples. As we have seen, a formal admission of defeat was a feature of bardic contests from at least the thirteenth century.

Owen notes 'because the contest is merely a prolongation of entry, hardly ever, it seems, were the contestants outside turned away'.⁴³ One would speculate that refusal could only have been a feature of a seasonal custom - which is suggestive of a link between the tradition and begging - and could not occur in the context of a wedding. The marriage *pwnco* presupposes the wedding will go ahead; those inside are obliged to lose, regardless of how long the contest lasts. A distinction thus emerges between a true competition with a reward at stake and a 'mock' encounter where the outcome is already fixed, as can be the case in seasonal Summer-Winter encounters.⁴⁴ This distinction is further developed below.

IV. Conclusion

The Welsh *pwnco* and the Breton *ar goulen* are clearly related. In both traditions the bards are central ritual figures involved in the bringing about and solemnisation of marriages. Their role extends to the performing of special entry rituals in concert with other bards. This simultaneously provided an opportunity to engage in a verse-contest, following a traditional framework, appreciated by an audience, and through which a bard could enhance his reputation. Welsh and later Breton tradition suggests that, partly in consequence of the decline of the bard's exclusivity, and with this his priest-like function, the solemn, one might say 'sacred' character of the entry ritual was overshadowed by the

verse contest, which became, in some cases, a contest between several individuals, and 'an end in itself', as Gwyndaf remarked. An allegorical frame, such as the 'lost animal' noted in Brittany, was not found in Wales, nor the ritual of refusing female proxies. The 'false' or 'hidden' bride custom is only noted in Wales, where the 'abduction' episode is also well-developed. In Brittany this episode is also dramatised in special wedding songs and symbolic action. The physical challenge issued by the bride's family to compete in games of skill emphasises the physicality of the Welsh encounter. We will recall that the Bulgarian custom, apart from obstacles, included games and wrestling as a prelude to the ritual entry dialogue.⁴⁵ Welsh evidence shows that the exchange could be used to deliver covert criticism of errant members of the community; this was not found to be a feature of the tradition in Brittany.

While the Breton exchanges took place between two bards, Welsh evidence points to the use of teams of bards on either side. Aside from being a dramatic articulation of solidarity and determination, this also enabled contests of considerable length to take place. Whilst still retaining 'formal' features such as greeting, eulogy and acknowledgment of defeat, the content of these exchanges centres on improvisations on the life of the community and the individuals involved; they have a more 'personal' and contemporary feel than the Breton examples. Despite the fixed outcome, they are also competitions, indulged in for the pleasure of pitting one's skills against the next man's. In this respect, the verbal battle may be seen almost as an extension of the physical contests which precede and follow it. Earlier Welsh accounts resemble the Breton models more closely. Trevelyan's *gwahoddr* who is bidder, master of ceremonies and poet-defender of the bride,

is comparable to the *breutaer*. The tone is formal, the content rather idealised and contains little in the way of contestatory spirit; in short, they have a ritual character. The Breton and early Welsh examples are ritual exchanges; ceremonial dialogues rather than poetic contests as such. These formal exchanges took place between bards who were ritual experts closely involved with the step-by-step process of the marriage itself. The movement towards a more lengthy, loosely-structured, community-oriented 'game' may have been a result of the decline of the bardic order and the ritual responsibilities which accompanied their position.

Another link with this ancient order may be suggested if we compare the marriage exchange with the contest described above where a household bard is challenged by an outsider, a contest which may have developed as bards found themselves in competition for the patronage of a severely reduced nobility. It is a contest on the doorstep, presumably in front of an audience, since such a contest in honour must be public. If the challenger wins, he enters the house and displaces its former occupant; he wins the 'prize'. The household bard is defeated either by being reduced to silence or, according to the competition rules outlined above, concedes with a formal acknowledgment of his inferiority. It may be that an existing model for the challenge and defeat of a domestic bard was applied to the context of the wedding. It is clear that the ritual exchange on the wedding morning is not a true competition; but entry to the house was ritualised, and the bards may have adopted an existing contestatory structure in order to provide a pretext for the entry of, and resistance to, the 'strangers'; the groom's family, equals, who must show they are worthy of gaining and leaving with the 'prize'. A certain amount of prestige

could be gained through the dialogic nature and performance of this ritual, and onlookers entertained, but this might be said to be a lesser concern, even incidental to the ritual context in which the dialogue took place. As the formal structures regulating bardic life disappeared, so the origins of what was a mock-contest imitating a real encounter in a different domain became a 'real' competition between local poets. The event became more secular and lost its ritual significance. The 'merry and grave' atmosphere Radost noted surrounding the ritual dialogues of Bulgaria could also be said to characterise the ritual exchange between the bards; both serious and comic, the exponents both 'priests' and entertainers. Perhaps the nuptial rituals of the *pencerrd*, who, as we noted, were forbidden to use satire or visit the plebeian houses, were adapted by the lesser *clerwyr* for common use; they of course were not subject to the same restrictions. As distinctions between the grades of bards became blurred, Christian priests began to bless weddings, and the sacred space of the threshold and home was transplanted to the church-door and altar, the wedding morning verse-contest became merely another task faced by the groom's party, undertaken communally in a boisterous and truly competitive, carnival spirit. In this sense it is a development comparable to the competitive exchanging of *pennylys* by individuals or parishes, characterised above as a community diversion — a practice related to, but separate from, formal exchanges between members of the bardic order.

In Wales no ritual exchange could be found which corresponds to the *Fest Ann Arvel*, although there is some evidence that a ritual involving the bringing in of furniture did take place. Owen describes the ritual of 'setting forth the marriage chamber' in Dyfed:

The womenfolk came together on this occasion in order to prepare the wedding feast which was to be held the following day. This was the

evening, too, when all the furniture belonging to the young couple was brought into the new home, and there is evidence which suggests that in some districts a recognised order in which the various items were to be carried into the house was observed, and that the ceremony itself was supervised by the two mothers.⁴⁶

This is ritualised entry, and it is not clear (Owen gives no source) why the order of the furniture should be important. The Breton 'trousseau' was placed in the most honoured site in the house, and one can imagine the location of the objects - the bride's wedding-chest, the bed, implements for the hearth, cooking utensils, all imbued with sacred significance - being as important as the order in which they were carried in. The occasion is presided over by the two mothers; this is a domestic entry and incorporation ritual belonging to the womenfolk. We will recall that after the dialogue of the *Fest Ann Arvel*, the dowry-chest was used as a table and various incorporation rituals followed. This concrete expression of harmony and union is perhaps the 'female' counterpart to the agonistic, 'masculine' display of disharmony and struggle, leading to eventual union which characterises the entry ritual of the 'fetching of the bride' the following day.

Notes

1. Villemarqué, 'Les Chants des Noces' n.pag., trans. NM

2. Thomas Pennant, A Tour in Wales (1770) 2 Vols. (London, 1783; Clwyd: Bridge, 1991) I: 471-75.

On his sources for these observations on the bardic tradition, the author notes: 'Several parts of this account are translated from Cambrobryannicae Cymraecaeve Linguae Institutiones; a very rare book, written by Doctor John Davydd Rhys of Llanfaetblu in Anglesey printed in 1592.' (476)

3. Pennant I: 461.

4. Marie Trevelyan, Glimpses of Welsh Life and Character (London: Hogg, 1893): 95.

5. Pennant 475.

6. Pennant 476.

7. Pennant 476.

8. Peter Roberts, The Cambrian Popular Antiquities of Wales (1815; Cyngor Sir, 1994) 167.

9. A. H. Dodds, A Short History of Wales (London: Batsford, 1972, 1990) 81.

10. Dodd 81.

11. Loomis and Johnston, 9.

12. Pennant 101-2

13. Islwyn and Jean Jenkins, Beyond the Black Tips: Life and Literature in a South Wales Valley (Aberystwyth: U College Wales, N.D): 197.

14. Roberts 160.

15. Trevelyan 58.

16. Trefor Owen, 'The Ritual Entry to the House in Wales,' Folklore Studies in the Twentieth Century, ed. Venetia Newall (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1980) 340.

17. Alan Roderick, The Folklore of Glamorgan (Cwmbran: Village, 1986) 90-1.

- 18.Roderick 89.
- 19.Trefor Owen, The Customs and Traditions of Wales (Cardiff, U of Wales P, 1991) 58.
- 20.Owen, Customs and Traditions 60.
- 21.Radost 31.
- 22.Owen, Customs and Traditions 56. The author reproduces an example of a bidder's address, taken from Mary Curtis, The Antiquities of Laugharne, Pendine and their Neighbourhoods (1880).
- 23.Roberts 160-1.
- 24.Owen, Customs and Traditions 56
- 25.Trevlelyan 58.
- 26.Trefor Owen, 'The Celebration of Candlemas in Wales', Folklore 84 (1973): 242.
- 27.Trevelyan 60-1
- 28.Cambry 163-4.
- 29.Van Gennep Manuel I: 325, Hautes-Alpes 100, Hanika 109.
- 30.Villemarqué, 'Les Chants des Noces', trans. NM.
- 31.Owen, Customs and Traditions, 41.
- 32.Roberts 162-4.
- 33.Roderick 89.
- 34.Breandán Ó Madagáin, 'Functions of Irish Song', Béaloideas 1985: 206.
- 35.Mary Corbett Harris, Crafts, Customs and Legends of Wales (Newton Abbot: David Charles, 1980) 59.
- 36.Lady Augusta Hamilton, Marriage Rites, Customs and Ceremonies of all Nations of the Universe (London: Chapple, 1822) 172.
- 37.Owen, Welsh Folk Customs, 162.
- 38.Trefor Owen, Welsh Folk Customs (Welsh Folk Museum 3rd ed. 1974) 163-66.

39. Robin Gwyndaf, 'Custom and Song in Wales', Lecture to the Folklore Society, June 1985. I am grateful to the author for allowing me access to his lecture-notes.

40. Gwyndaf 18.

41. Gwyndaf 18.

42. Owen, 'The Ritual Entry to the House in Wales' 340-1.

43. Owen, 'Ritual Entry' 340.

44. For a discussion of this topic, see Emily Lyle, 'Winning and Losing in Seasonal Contests' Cosmos 6 (1990): 161-171.

45. Radost 40.

46. Owen, Customs and Traditions 41.

Chapter Four

Ireland

Despite the many references to early Irish marriage practice, law, boundary and seasonal ritual and myth which to a great extent inform this study, no material was found which is directly comparable to the rituals under examination. Prominent Irish scholars, aware of the scope of this study, have asserted that they are aware of no custom related to the *rèiteach*.¹ To give one source as an example, a lengthy and highly detailed study by Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 'Some Marriage Customs and their Regional Distribution' describes many traditions we have noted in this study, including roping, horse races and processions, but makes no mention of any ritual dialogue or drama.² The abduction motif is also present in marriage custom.³ Breandán Ó Madagáin, in his important and substantial (almost 90-page) study 'Functions of Irish Song' makes no mention of any verbal tradition resembling the highly functional tradition of the *rèiteach*.⁴ A 1985 PhD thesis dedicated to outlining an ethnology of verbal behaviour in an Irish-speaking community makes no reference to ritual dialogue at all, despite arriving at an 'ethnic classification' of a huge variety of distinct verbal forms, the majority dialogic in structure. These include *magadh* and *aor* (interaction involving ridicule and satire), *dea-chaint* ('competitive verbal play between individuals... [a] fast moving exchange... of turns and witty remarks') and *greann* ('pleasant conversing and merry verbal sport').⁵ There is no mention of allegorical speaking in any context. Given the scope, extensive detail and intimate knowledge of the community displayed in the study, it is barely credible that if a

highly developed (and public) ritual exchange such as the *rèiteach* had existed in Ireland within living memory it would have escaped the author's attention.

Seasonal exchanges, however, certainly exist; in his study The Festival of Brigit Séamas Ó Catháin details a dialogue which takes place during the saint's visits to the community on the eve of her festival. In this 'dramatic encounter... the husband seeks admission to his house in the name of Brigit.'

Gabhaigí ar bhur nglúine,
Fosclaigí bhur súile,
Agus ligigí isteach Bríd!

Go on your knees,
Open your eyes,
And admit Brigit!

to which the reply is

Is é beatha!
Is é beatha!
Is é beatha na mná uaisle!

Welcome!
Welcome!
Welcome to the holy woman!⁶

This threshold exchange is compared to one in Carmina Gadelica in which a woman holding a highly-decorated doll, *dealbh Bride*, 'the ikon of Brigit'

goes to the door of the house, and standing on the step with her hands on the jambs, calls softly into the darkness, 'Tha leaba Bríde deiseal,' Bride's bed is ready.' To this a ready woman behind replies, 'Thigeadh Bríde steach, is e beatha Bríde,' 'Let Bride come in, Bride is welcome.' The woman at the door again addresses Bride, 'A Bhríde! Bhríde thig a steach, tha do leaba deanta. Gleidh an teach dh'an Tríana,' 'Bride, Bride, come thou in, thy bed is made. Preserve the house for the Trinity.'⁷

Given the survival of this seasonal threshold exchange in Ireland, it is indeed puzzling that

the comparable marriage dialogues are apparently absent. As we have noted, in Wales, as in Scotland, both seasonal and marriage threshold rituals are found. There is some suggestion, however, that these rituals may once have existed. In Sean Ó Súilleabháin's celebrated study *Irish Wake Amusements*, the author points out that wakes were used for courting and arranging marriages. He also details several games which centre on matchmaking and mock-marriage. Many are simply imitations of marriage; girls are brought forward one by one to a series of men and 'married' to them, sometimes by a man dressed as a priest. In one, 'Doctoring', the girls were 'hauled' from their seats, and one may assume that women were not always willing participants in these rough games. This may be compared to those who tried to hide from the groom's representatives at the *rèiteach* to avoid being dragged up to meet the groom. Of these matchmaking games, the author points out that 'the clergy actively opposed marriage travesties of this kind' and indeed reports that according to one source priests would warn from the pulpit that 'marriages performed as games at wakes were as binding as those in a church'.⁸ Several games appear to contain elements which could be linked to the *rèiteach*. In 'Selling the Colts, Selling the Pigs',

...two players took the main parts, one the seller, the second the buyer. Other players would be driven like animals into the kitchen; they were sometimes covered with hides or skins, and were supposed to be for sale. The buyer would start off by pretending to examine each animal in turn, as would his counterpart in real life, beating them with a stick and making sarcastic comments on some. A bargain would be finally made after much argument; then the animals had to^{be} marked as sold.⁹

This is reminiscent of the *rèiteach* at which the false brides are presented and refused as animals by the groom's representative. Indeed, as we shall see, in one example the women

are 'inspected' in the same way as the 'animals' in the wake game. Many games are dialogic in structure, and present many opportunities for both wit, sarcasm and repartee as well as for rather vicious censure and punishment of those who were disliked. The potential for a *rèiteach* to function as a charivari is noted below.

'Dividing the Meat' is another animal-game, at which the buyer arrived at the door of the wake-house 'dragging another player after him to represent the animal' and claiming that he had come to sell it.

The seller and some buyer would start off bargaining, each as tough as the other, until finally agreement on the price was reached. The buyer would then knock the animal onto the floor and pretend to draw its blood. He would pretend to offer for sale imaginary portions of the meat to different persons in the company, commenting wittily and sarcastically on both the meat and the person to whom he offered it.¹⁰

Here we may note the arrival at the door posing as the seller of an animal, the mock bargaining and the emphasis on verbal skill.

In the following description of *Cleas an Stóilin* (The Stool Trick') or 'Frumso Framso' we may note the element of resistance, whether mock or real, the role played by the 'master of ceremonies' who calls the participants forward, and his 'assistants' who fetch the women. There were two versions:

A man sat on a chair or stool in the centre of the floor and asked a girl to come to kiss him. If the girl were unwilling to do so, two players, dressed in straw, would force her to obey... A man who acted as leader in charge of the game would ask the man seated on the chair: 'What do you want for your dance?' his reply, in Irish, would be: 'A nice girl to be talking to'. 'Name her,' the leader would order. The girl who was named would then come willingly to kiss him, or was forced to do so.¹¹

This may be considered analogous to the 'calling on sequence' present in the *rèiteach*, described below. Ó Súilleabháin notes the robust response these games received from the

church:

There is ample evidence that the clergy looked with disfavour on this game. Bishops often condemned it... and a guide-book for the clergy concerning the hearing of confessions [1743] has this to say... 'Did you promote any plays unbecoming those of a different sex? How often did you promote such Plays and Diversions, and how many people did you engage in it at every time? Among these Plays you may reckon Frumsy Framsy used at weakes (sic) by the vulgar young People, the cause of a multitude of Sins. These Games and Plays are Hellish Artifices, which the Devil makes use of to convey without scruple unchaste Love and thoughts into the heart, because many of them are looked upon in the world as so many innocent recreations, but in truth most dangerous and malignant, and therefore absolutely to be forbidden.¹²

As we shall see, the Scottish church made repeated attempts to outlaw secular marriage, and indeed Ó Súilleabháin details one game 'Leaping the Besom' which involved making a girl jump over a broom, thereafter being proclaimed 'married' and a ring placed on her finger.¹³ Perhaps this heavy and apparently well-informed censure by the Irish clergy of such 'Hellish Artifices' was ultimately successful in outlawing imitative and matchmaking games of all kinds. One may speculate that among the first examples of this 'Devil's work' to disappear were the very public marriage customs involving elements such as a procession of women-as-animals and a ritual which amounted to secular marriage followed by consummation. We shall see that policing the Highlands of Scotland presented real difficulties for the Church, and met with little success. The differing nature of the faith in Ireland, the monitoring structures put in place, and possibly a greater degree of willingness on the part of the population to abandon such practices may well offer one theory as to the disappearance of a set of marriage rites which one feels certain must have existed in a comparable form to those across the water.

We know that matchmakers were used; Linda Ballard, in her Tying the knot: Marriage Traditions in the North of Ireland terms them 'blackfoots'.¹⁴ For those who could not afford the priest's fee, there was recourse to the 'buckle' or 'couple' beggars, itinerants who performed this unsanctioned function. Ballard details a 'delivering the bride' procession, with a race on horseback and/or on foot. Shots were fired as they set out. Another 'fetching the bride' tradition is described by Estyn Evans in Irish Folk Ways, one which is directly comparable to the Scottish tradition of 'Running the broose':

On the day appointed for the wedding, the bridegroom's party, from ten to twenty of his relations... mount their horses, the women behind the men, except a few of the latter that are single and intend running for the bottle, and advance towards the bride's residence, where they are met by a few single horsemen belonging to the bride's party. When the parties meet, those of them that are single-mounted then contend for who will be at the bride's house first; where, when the parties arrive, the bridegroom and bride are presented with a plate of oatmeal and salt, of which each of them take two small mouthfuls; probably to prevent the power of witchcraft or the evil-eye.¹⁵

We recognise from the above account several customs which in the other cultures studied feature ritual dialogue; the arrival at the bride's house, the ritual taking of salt, protection against the evil eye. We cannot, of course, prove that there was dialogue, although it seems unlikely that the groom's entry to the home or the couple's salt ritual are conducted in silence. Roping customs were also known; Ballard notes

In the more distant past, general involvement in disruptive behaviour took several forms. A bride might find her path to church blocked, and while sometimes the aim of such action was to collect money which would ensure the removal of the barrier, many brides were compelled to walk through fields and perhaps through mud to the ceremony.¹⁶

Again, evidence from elsewhere tells us that when confronted with a barrier of this kind,

the payment or condition of crossing often features ritual dialogue. That we have no record of the exchange is not in itself sufficient to prove its absence. Boundary or threshold ritual dialogue may lose its sacred quality and end up as a knockabout tug-of-war; it is for the observer to recognise the structure and decide that on balance they are unlikely to have always been 'mute' customs. In the same way, the underlying structure of the wake games is often so similar to the ritual drama performed at the *rèiteach* that it seems barely credible to conclude that such an enjoyable, functional community event was unknown in its sister country.

Notes

1. A paper based on this study was given at the Nordic-Celtic/Baltic conference in Copenhagen in 1994. Séamas Ó Catháin, Pádraig Ó Héalaí and Bo Almqvist were all present and confirmed that they knew of nothing comparable having existed in Ireland.
2. Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 'Some Marriage Customs and their Regional Distribution,' Béalóideas 42-44 (1974-76): 136-75.
3. Estyn Evans, Irish Folkways 284. His source is Wood-Martin, The Elder Faiths 2: 32.
4. Béalóideas 53 (1985): 130-216.
5. Kathleen Sheehan Lambert, An Ethnography of Storytelling in Rannafast, Ireland. Diss. Boston U, 1985. Ann Arbor: UMI 1985. 9012283: 151-162. The author's access to specific verbal forms extends to texts of lamentation (166-68).
6. Ó Catháin 42.
7. Carmina Gadelica I: 167-68. Quoted in Ó Catháin 42.
8. Irish Wake Amusements 97-8.
9. Wake Amusements 84.
10. Wake Amusements 88.
11. Wake Amusements 94-5. The author mentions other games with a matchmaking theme: 'The Nine Daughters', 'I am a Poor Widow that came from Athlone', 'The White Cockcade' and 'We are all Marching to Quebec'.
12. Irish Wake Amusements 95.
13. Wake Games 97.
14. Linda Ballard, Tying the Knot: Marriage traditions in the North of Ireland (Ulster: Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, n.d.): 5.
15. E. Estyn Evans, Irish Folk Ways (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) 284.
16. Ballard 18.

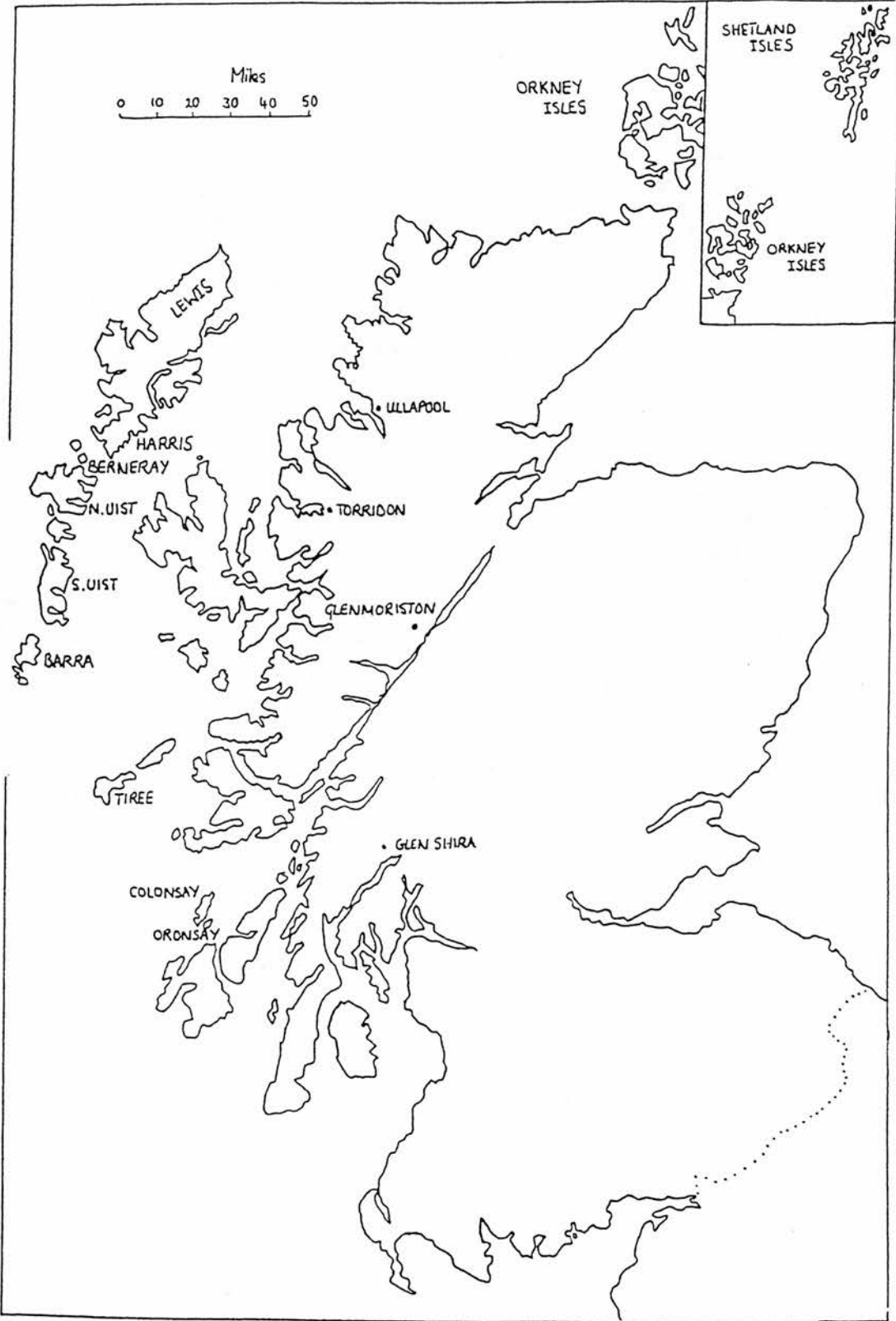


Figure 3

Chapter Five

Scotland

I. Introduction: *rèiteach*

In Scotland, ritual dialogue as part of a betrothal ceremony is found in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Islands. The ritual occasion is the formal betrothal contract usually called *rèiteach*, and besides the dialogue, which in many cases is allegorical in form, there is also evidence of the ritual refusing of 'false brides' and of the 'hidden bride' custom. In what may be its most complete form there is a close resemblance to the Breton custom described above. There is an initial verbal exchange between the suitor's representative and that of the girl's family, in which the girl is asked for or discussed allegorically in a ritualised way. This is followed by the presentation of a selection of female relatives who must each be refused through similarly indirect means. Finally, the bride-to-be appears, or if hidden is located, she is accepted, the ritual concluded and the betrothal pledged with whisky.

The terms *rèiteach* and *an rèite*, whilst denoting a formal contract to marry and the feast accompanying it, also means 'agreement' or 'reconciliation', 'a plane or level place', and is related to terms denoting 'harmony', 'peace', 'union', and the acts of 'clearing', 'putting in order' and 'unravelling'.¹ The *rèiteach* was an important event, sometimes as important as the wedding feast itself, and although normally a prelude to the publishing of the banns and official marriage, it was a solemn and binding contract which could not be broken.² Before examining the nature and importance of the ritual, it must be placed in the

context of the marriage laws of Scotland.

Pre-Reformation Canon law required four elements for a regular marriage:

consent of the parties expressed in their betrothal; the consent of the parties at the beginning of their joint married lives - this consent was the heart of the whole matter - but although there was a marriage in existence after these two sets of consents, it was not a perfect marriage until *copula carnalis* took place... and [finally] the blessing of the Church on the marriage, but this was never essential to the complete, legal and perfect marriage.³

The espousal was a formal contract preceding the marriage celebration and might be entered into by the parties themselves, or their parents and guardians for them, and was regarded as irregular unless performed in the presence of a priest and before witnesses. A normal espousal was *per verba de futuro*, a promise by each to proceed to marriage in the face of the church. A breach of this promise led to church censure as well as the legal penalty of breach of contract. A betrothal *per verba de presenti* was a promise that they now consent to marry. The essential difference being that

A contract of future espousals, however regular, did not amount to marriage; a contract of present espousals, where the man said, 'I take thee for my wife,' and the wife said, 'I take thee for my husband... was a legal marriage; although *copula carnalis subsequens* in either case made a valid (though irregular) marriage.⁴

These 'clandestine' or 'irregular' marriages, amounting to a formal betrothal with consummation were thus 'valid' in the eyes of the law, and, one assumes, the local community. The early church did not interfere greatly with what were largely continuations of pre-Christian practices; in the eleventh century, 'Irish monasteries were perceived as lax, eccentric and wordly, and Gaelic church leaders tolerated practices (especially a casual attitude to marriage) which the rest of Christendom regarded with

horror. Part of the solution was the introduction of continental monastic rules'.⁵ The persistent nature of the practices the church tried to eradicate, including well-known customs such as 'handfasting' can be seen in early church statutes. In 1242, the Bishop of St. Andrews ordained that 'no one contract marriage or betrothal unless in the presence of lawful witnesses, by whom the marriage can be proved should any doubt arise about it' and that 'marriage must absolutely not be contracted between persons who are unknown'.⁶ The thirteenth century synod in Aberdeen stated 'no espousals must be celebrated without trustworthy and lawful witnesses'; 'no promise of marriage to be contracted be made to any one save in presence of the priest and of three or four trustworthy witnesses' and 'we also forbid the clandestine contracting of marriages, and ordain that no priest shall presume to have anything to do with such marriages'.⁷ A century later, the synod in St. Andrews were still engaging robustly with the problem,⁸ again in 1551-2,⁹ and in 1559 they observed:

Since it is ascertained that two evil customs or rather corruptions, by the enemy of the human race, have increased... namely, that to the hurt of their souls, many... make secret compacts and a kind of espousals privately and in a concealed manner, followed by carnal union, before marriage is contracted... that many contrary to the laws, after espousals made *per verba de futuro* and before the contraction of marriage and its solemnisation in the face of the church... do not hesitate to pass to carnal union. All priests... shall strictly prohibit those who have contracted them from having carnal union until marriage has been contracted and solemnised... let this be strictly observed by widows as well as others.¹⁰

Priests who were still 'not afraid even publicly' to solemnise clandestine marriage were to be suspended and fined. The parties involved, under threat of excommunication, had to be separated for a month and also fined.

The events leading to marriage in Gaelic society formed a three or four-part structure. First was the 'agreement' to become betrothed, which was sometimes the first time the parties had met, and called *còrdadh* or *rèiteach beag* (small betrothal). This was an intimate meeting between the parties to be espoused and their immediate family, at which the girl's father's permission was sought. A formal betrothal followed, the *rèiteach* or *rèiteach mór* (big betrothal). This was a ceremony attended by the main parties involved as well as less close relatives and friends. It was at this meeting that the customs involving ritual dialogue and the 'false' or 'hidden bride' customs took place. Following this was the wedding itself, the *banais*, and in certain regions a *banais-tighe*, 'house wedding', at the home of the groom. From this arrangement, one might consider the second stage as a form of 'pre-contract', or 'first consent' with the marriage forming the contract itself, the 'second consent'. However, given the typical ceremonial elements of the second; hands joined together, consent uttered in front of witnesses, sharing a single glass; one could conclude that this was the main event, the 'contract' with the *còrdadh* or *rèiteach beag* forming the 'pre-contract'. As we shall see, strong emphasis is placed on the consent of the girl herself, who typically defers to her father, or he to her, often using a formulaic device. T.C. Smout remarks 'consent made a marriage - the consent of the couple, not the consent of the parents, who in the last instance have no right of veto... on the other hand the expectation is... that the children will consult their parents and not act without their blessing'.¹¹ The presence of non-kin witnesses, the semi-public nature of the event and the conspicuous role consent plays in the proceedings leads one to conclude that the legal, as well as the traditional significance of the ceremony was understood by the participants. In

addition to these components, there is some evidence that the sealing of the contract at the betrothal extended further than sharing a glass of whisky; a minister recalls:

about thirty years ago I knew a man at that time perhaps forty years of age
- the last man in the parish of Kilfinan who immediately after the 'contract'
- *reite*, Gaelic - of marriage, was formally bedded with his wife.
Proclamations of the banns was made on the Sunday following the *reite*
and the marriage was solemnised forthwith.¹²

Although the minister stresses that the marriage followed swiftly, this may not always have been the case - as is suggested from the church statutes - and perhaps many couples did not progress to marriage in the eyes of the church at all. A betrothal followed by consummation was not an uncommon practice. In Shetland the betrothal custom of the 'speiring night' had the same significance; 'the couple were expected to sleep together that night as a seal of the contract, but not to have intercourse again until after the wedding'.¹³ In Germany, 'protestant authorities... prohibited popular mating customs which held that sex between betrothed couples was not sinful'.¹⁴ 'Handfasting' might be thought of as a marriage *per verba de futuro* with an option to solemnise after a 'trial' of a year and a day. We recall that the Breton word *dimézi* denotes both 'betrothal' and 'marriage', and it may be that, as in Breton tradition, the betrothal ceremony was, at one time, a 'marriage' in the eyes of the community. Nineteenth-century commentators estimated that 'up to one-third of Scottish marriages in the eighteenth century had been contracted irregularly' and by the eighteenth century the Church had given up its insistence that marriages be contracted in a church building or at its entrance.¹⁵ In 1847 a commentator noted;

In this session [of parliament] Registration and Marriage bills failed, but they *must* succeed soon... I did not imagine that clandestine and irregular marriages could have had any respectable and avowed defenders. Yet

almost every presbytery in Scotland has disgraced itself by standing up for them.¹⁶

Whatever the attitude of clergymen, we must not assume that secular marriage persisted in the Highlands because of a generally prevailing 'lax' attitude to such matters. As in Ireland, 'with a low ratio of priests to people it cannot have been easy to organise even an informal priestly ceremony in the more remote areas of the country, to impose regulations relating to consanguinity, nor to supervise patterns of sexual behaviour'.¹⁷ J L Campbell observes that 'some of the couples charged with fornication, e.g. in the Argyll Synod Minutes may in fact have been Catholics so married [by *per verba de futuro*] and awaiting the possible coming of a priest at a time when there were very few priests in the Highland mission'.¹⁸ Later observers attested to the superior moral standards of the Highlanders; a nineteenth-century survey on 'licentiousness' revealed that 27 of the 38 parishes reporting 'little or no' examples of the 'vice' were in the Highlands. Four hundred others reported it was 'lamentable'.¹⁹ When the Church of Scotland Commission on the Religious Condition of the People visited the Highlands in 1891 and 1896-98, they reported that illegitimacy was 'comparatively rare' on Skye, 'rare' in Lochcarron and 'extremely rare' in Tongue. In Tain, 'the moral life of the people' was 'remarkably pure'.²⁰

It was not until 1834 that an Act was passed which allowed priests and ministers other than the Established and Episcopal Churches to solemnise marriages again, and the Highlands was in any case poorly-served by ministers considering the geographical area to be covered and the communication difficulties involved. The cost of publishing the banns could pose another disincentive to prompt solemnisation.

For comparison, in Ireland, 'Celtic secular marriage' was the norm until the end of the old order in 1603, and 'Christian matrimony the exception grafted onto this system'.²¹ No more than one in twenty were married in church, and the tenets of the canon law were followed, that 'the mere declaration, or even intent of the parties, followed by consummation, constituted a permanently valid and binding, though clandestine marriage'.²² One commentator remarks that 'the main reason for the continuation of clandestine marriage was the deep-rooted belief that matrimony was a private rather than a public affair, of concern only to the individuals involved and their families'.²³ The three-part structure of the *rèiteach* may be seen as a conscious attempt to reconcile this ancient belief with the obligations placed upon those intending to be married by the law and the church. Another factor may have been the anxiety surrounding consanguinity, where 'the canon law was much more demanding than common law thinking' and, especially in more isolated areas, 'partners were likely to be related by either blood or marriage'.²⁴ The prohibition was perhaps even more irksome for the upper classes; in the fourteenth century Highlands 'it was claimed that 'there is such a dearth of nobles that it is hard for them to marry except within the prohibited degrees'.²⁵ Although tradition held that a marriage was a public affair, it seems likely that a degree of publicity - in many cases the whole community or island was invited - was encouraged in order to avoid accusations of secrecy. The ritual use of eulogy, aside from the honouring of ancestors, may also have functioned to remind community members of degrees of consanguinity. One informant observes 'it was a tradition - you didn't marry any of your cousins. This was regarded as some form of incest if it happened; nobody argued about it, there were no rules written for

it, but just - it was in the psyche; its roots go back to ancient tradition, it was fear of incest, it just couldn't happen'.²⁶ Another informant is more blunt; 'But in olden times they were all getting married in the home. Mostly some relation of their own they were marrying. That was not right. Not right either'.²⁷

As an acknowledgment of their new status special restrictions applied between the *rèiteach* and the wedding. One commentator notes that between the 'contract night' and the Sunday after marriage, 'the bride and bridegroom must not attend a wedding or funeral otherwise their first-born will break Diana's pales or never be married'.²⁸ In South Uist a man was not allowed out on his own at night between his *rèiteach* and his marriage, as it was said a *fuath* (spectre) would chase him.²⁹

II. Asking for the bride

a. Matchmaking

In early times, young men seldom looked outside the community for their partners, and one informant from South Uist observes that girls were plentiful because they did not go to the mainland to work.³⁰ Matchmakers were used, and, as in Brittany, verbal skill was a prerequisite. Tailors also featured as matchmakers in Scotland:

It was generally considered necessary that a third party, in sympathy with the couple and possessing influence with the minister, should be let into the secret. There were one or two men who proved so successful in carrying out such arrangements that they were recognised as almost professional matrimonial agents. One such was Alexander Mackerchar, known locally as the Cripple Tailor.³¹

As in Brittany, the mobile nature of his trade gave him access to information on

prospective partners:

One would have expected that, when so many things were made at home, the people would have made their own clothes, but especially in the case of the men, this was not so. They invariably employed a tailor, who used to make the round of the countryside, staying in one township after another to make the people's clothes and generally bringing a welcome budget of news and gossip.³²

Walter Gregor describes the scene in the home:

The tailor was summoned to the house, and great was the preparation for him. He was treated with more than ordinary respect, and on his arrival was installed in the *room*. The goodwife produced her webs, and her orders with many an injunction not to make any *clippans*... The tailor handled the cloth knowingly and praised it; and the goodwife looked pleased, and ceased to say one word about *clippans*... The tailor set to work, and plied his needle and thread early and late - sometimes assisted by the females...³³

We may note from this account the tailor's verbal skill in praising the object under his attention and in overcoming the resistance of the woman of the house. It is of interest that he is set to work with 'the females'; perhaps this goes some way to explain his marginal status, a feminised male '*malprise*', as the Breton matchmaker was described, but treated with respect on this evidence, at least by the women-folk. The opportunity for gossip and exchanging information about potential marriage partners is clear. There may also have been an anxiety that the tailor, left alone with the women, may have had an opportunity for activities beyond his remit.

The encounter between two representatives who knew one another could be light-hearted and friendly, if robust; J.F. Campbell remembers

In the Highlands, a man used to go on the part of the bridegroom to settle the dower with the bride's father, or some one who acted for him. They argued the point, and the argument gave rise to much fun and rough wit.

For example, here is one bit of such a discussion, of which I remember to have heard long ago.

'This is the youngest and the last, she must be the worst; you must give me a large dower, or I will not take her.'

'Men always sell the shots first when they can; this is the best - I should give no dower at all.'

The first knotty point settled, and the wedding day fixed, the bridegroom, before the wedding day, sent a best man and maid to look after the bride, and gathered all his friends at home. The bride also gathered her friends, and her party led the way to church.³⁴

The go-between's neutral status gave him a certain freedom of expression:

Say Angus went to ask for my daughter, and most of these old men were very witty and the man that was going to ask for the daughter very often he might be a shy man and he used to take this witty man with you. And he used to have an answer whatever the old man asked he wanted for his daughter. 'Are you this or that?' The witty man had an answer for everything he could say. Well, that's the man that was after the girl, [he] might be shy or be... might be word-stuck. But this witty man he'd nothing to do with him so he usually got stuck into the old man. He had to be a witty man; he had to win the old man over so that he could give the daughter away, otherwise he might... put the daughter away you see.³⁵

One informant describes the qualities necessary in a good 'master of ceremonies' - the local bard who would take part in the *rèiteach*:

They got together and the two parties... the family of the bride - and they'd discuss it. My father and his cousin Big Donald, they were in great demand because they did it well... It was an intuitive selection in the community... a good sense of humour, a good use of language... politeness and drollery mixed up. There are natural bards; natural bards have a facility with words... there's a hereditary streak in it. I knew one family in Berneray, Harris who had that facility and it was passed on... some of them were lay preachers and their facility with words was very apparent in that arena, and they would also take part as M.C.'s at weddings... not educated in the formal sense of the term but a large vocabulary and a bit poetic.³⁶

Across the water on the Isle of Man, "it was formerly usual for the lover to employ a go-between called a *dooinney-moylee*, a 'praising man'... to get the parents to consent to the

match and to arrange the marriage portion with them".³⁷ The following Manx song indicates both the importance of verbal skill in wooing as well as communicating the immense weariness of the unfortunate suitor, who perhaps should have hired a *dooiney-moylee*:

Nancy t'ayns Mannin

Nancy t'ayns Mannin t'ee boirey mee-hene
 As er y hon eck ta mee fiojit as creen
 Sooree as moylley as ginsh reddyn bwaagh
 She gialdyn da rheynni nagh gooilleen ee dy bragh

Yinnin urree daanys as geddyn woie kiss
 As yiaragh ee room, t'ou maarliagh gyn-yss
 Yinnagh she shin gys focklyn, as bee ginnsh shin cooish
 Ve thousane dy chowag dy reall shinyn dooysht

Megh er yn oie tammylt beg roish y laa
 Rew riett as ansooryn cha man aym dy ghra
 Irrin dy lhiastey neayr as y chorneil
 Goll shiar lesh y darras kiart sheeley myr snail

O less boy, nagh treih eh goll magh ayns yn oie
 Reih dangeyr mooar moddee as drogh aegny sleih
 Goll trooid thoo as thanney shen brishey my chree
 Ve a just goll-rish maarliagh veagh geid fud ny hoie

Gys smooineaght er sooree te cur orrym craa
 Ve a shooyll fud ny hoie as faint fey ny laa
 As share dou ve laccal ben choud as beeym bio
 Cha vel troublit as seaghnit eishtagh myr shoh.

[Nancy in Man, she troubles me so
 And because of her I'm withered and wizzened
 With courting and praising and saying pretty things
 She made me a promise she'll never fulfil.

I'd be bold with her and get from her a kiss
 And she'd say to me, you're a sly thief
 That would bring us to words and we'd have a chat

There'd be burble and chatter to keep us awake.

Out at night till a short while before day (break)
 Ever running out of answers, I'd not have much to say
 I'd get up sluggishly over in the corner
 And make for the door just sneaking like a snail.

Alas boy, how wretched it is to go out at night
 Running the great danger of dogs and people's ill-will
 Going through thick and thin, that breaks my heart
 To be just like a thief
 That steals all through the night.

The thought of courting makes me quiver
 To be walking all night and tired all day
 It's better for me to be lacking a wife as long as I'm alive
 And not troubled and bothered then like this.]³⁸

One informant from Argyllshire confirms another quality desired in a matchmaker - his physical appearance.

Calum MacLean: Agus a nise am biodh am fear a bhiodh ag iarraidh na mnatha am biodh e toir duine leis, no biodh iad a ...?

Mrs MacLucas: Bha daonnan fear còmh ris.

CM: Agus bhiodh e bruidhinn air a shon.

Mrs M: Airson bruidhinn. Bha e car *shy*. Tha t-seans an duine òg bha e *shy*. Agus am fear bha e toirt leis bha e daonnan feum a bhith uamharraidh caran math air bruidhinn a sineach, sunndach dheth fhèin.

CM: Agus a robh iad ag ràdh gur e duine a bhiodh crùbach no bacach no meang sam bith ann, nach dèanadh esan a' chùis?

Mrs M: O cha robh feum idir air-san. Cha robh. Cha robh feum aca air.

CM: Cha ghabhadh meang sam bith a bhith a's...

Mrs M: A chionn bha feum seasachd suas air son an duine òg.

[**CM:** And now, would the man asking for a wife take someone with him, or...?

Mrs M: There was always someone with him

CM: And speaking on his behalf.

Mrs M: To speak on his behalf. He was rather shy. It seems the young man was shy. And the one he took with him always needed to be rather terribly good at talking, and good-humoured.

CM: And did they say that a man who was lame or crippled or had any blemish would not be right?

Mrs M: Oh, he would not do at all. No. They did not need him.

CM: Any kind of blemish would not be tolerated...

Mrs M: Because it was necessary to stand up for the young man.]³⁹

We may contrast this account with that of the 'cripple tailor' described above, active around Fortingall in the 19th century. The informant's explanation is that the matchmaker required a strong physical presence, in order to put over his case successfully. We may speculate that his physical perfection also had a ritual significance; he was, after all, embodying the young man's youth, strength, capability and determination; his representative not just in words but in physical manifestation.

The following account from Uist provides a good picture of the background to marriage a century ago, including information on 'night-visiting', matchmaking, and a suggestion that participants in a *rèiteach* were indeed aware of its legal implications. It is of interest that the custom is already described as being 'out of fashion'.

Bha a leithid a rud ri rèiteach ann. A nis 'se rud a th'anns a rèiteach a th'air a dhol a mach a fasan ann an Uidhist. 'Se glè bheag a tha pòsadh an diugh a tha deanamh rèiteach idir, ged a tha feadhainn ann 'ga chumail suas fhathast. Faodaidh sinn cuideachd iomradh a dheanamh air mar a bha na càraidean a taghadh a chèile aig an àm a bha sin. Mar bu trice, nuair a bhiodh fear airson pòsadh, shealladh e timchioll air air feadh nam boireannach a bh'anns a nàbachd aige fhein, feuch cò an tè bu fhreagarraiche a chitheadh e air a shon fhein. Mur a deònaicheadh i sin a phòsadh, cha bhiodh ann ach gum feuchadh e tè eile, agus mu stadadh e gheibheadh e tè. 'S ann gu math ainneamh a bhiodh duine a dol a mach as a choimhearsneachd aige fhein anns an àm ud a dh'iarraidh mnathadh.

Bha na daoine - fireannaich agus boireannaich pailt gu leòr anns an dùthaich, cha robh na boireannaich a falbh a dh'iarraidh cosnadh gu Galldachd an uair ud mar a tha iad an diugh, agus mar sin bha an sluagh gu math na bu lìonmhoire. Bha àiteachan ann an Uidhist 's an àm ud agus dà theaghlach air a feadhainn dhe na croitean.

Nuair a bhiodh fear don teaghlach a pòsadh, thogadh e taigh dha fhèin agus dhan bhean òig air pios eile dhen chroit, agus rachadh iad a dh'fhuireach ann a sin. A nis, bha gu leòr ann a bha a suirighe agus a

deanamh suas ri cheile cuideachd, ach bha an seorsa eile gu math pailt air a shon sin.

Nuair a bhiodh iad a suirighe anns an àm sin, 's ann mar bu trice ann an taigh a bhoireannaich a bhiodh am fireannach, agus bha gu leòr do chaithris na h-oidhche a dol air adhart.

A nis, ged a bhiodh e suirighe air nighinn agus e eòlach gu leòr oirre, agus fios aige cuideachd gu robh i deònach a phòsadh, dh'fheumadh e an toiseach a'"dhol 'ga h-iarraidh." Bha a toil fhèin aige ri fhaotainn ann an làrach fhianuasan, agus cuideachd toil a h'athar. Chan e e fhèin a bhiodh a deanamh na h-iarraidh idir. Dheanadh e suas ri caraide dha fhèin, an oidhche a bha e am beachd a dhol a dh'iarraidh a bhoireannaich, agus gheibheadh iad gnothaichean air dòigh ar reir sin. Dh'fheumadh e botul uisge-bheatha fhaotainn co-dhiubh, agus nuair a thigeadh an oidhche a chaidh a chur air leth, dh'fhalbhadh e fhèin agus am fear bha còmhla ris, agus ruigeadh iad taigh a bhoireannaich.

Mar bu trice, bhiodh fios aig muinntir an taighe gu robh e a tighinn a cheart oidhche bha seo, agus bhiodh gnothaichean deiseil aca air an coinneamh. Bhiodh an nighean a bha e tighinn a dh'iarraidh air a còmhach anns an aodach a b'fheàrr a bhiodh aice, agus an còrr do mhuinntir an taighe air a reir sin.

Ach cha bhiodh sin mar sin ach far am biodh fear is tè a bha a deanamh suas ri chèile greis roimhe sin. Am fear a rachadh a dh'iarraidh tè air an eanalas, cha bhiodh deisalachadh sam bith roimhe, a chionn cha bhiodh dad a dh'fhios aig muinntir an taighe, neo aig a nighean fhèin gu robh e ruighinn.

Co-dhiubh, nuair a ruigeadh e fhèin agus a charaide taigh a bhoireannaich, rachadh iad a staigh. Theireadh iad greis ann a sin an toiseach a bruidhinn 's a seanachas. Gheibheadh bean-an-taighe biadh air dòigh agus chuireadh i gu bòrd iad. Rachadh dram a chur mun cuairt, agus dh'innseadh caraide an fhir a bha g'iarraidh na h'ighinn an turas air a robh iad. Bheireadh a h'athar dha cead a nighean a phòsadh mu bha i fhèin deònach, agus rachadh beagan uaireanan a chur seachad ann a sin le dram is òrain. Dheanadh iad suas an uairsin an oidhche bhiodh rèiteach ann.

Ann an àiteachan 's e "còrdadh" a chanadh iad ris a cheud oidhche - an oidhche bhiodh an duine agus a charaide a g'iarraidh a bhoireannaich. Agus os deigh a chòrdaidh bha a rèiteach a tighinn. Ann an àiteachan eile bha an còrdadh agus a rèiteach air a ghabhail na aon rud. Agus tric gu leòr ann an Uibhist cuideachd, 's ann aig a rèiteach a bhiodh caraide an duine a g'iarraidh toil a bhoireannaich agus a h'athar.

...

Nuair a chruinnicheadh na daoine, rachadh an cur gu bòrd. Be seo bòrd a' rèiteach. Bhiodh feadhainn air an taghadh air son suidhe aig a bhòrd seo, càirdean is daoine dhen t-seòrsa sin. Agus 's ann aig a' bhòrd seo a dh'innseadh caraide an fhir a bha dol a phòsadh an reusan anns an robh iad

cruinn air an oidche seo.

Bha athair na h'ighinn a toirt seachad a chead agus a bheannachd dha n' chàraid òg an sin a breith air làmhnan air a cheile agus bha dram ga chur mun cuairt, agus a chuile duine timchioll a bhùird ag' òl deoch-slàinte na càraid òg a bha a dol a phòsadh.

[There was such a thing as a *rèiteach*. Now the *rèiteach* has gone out of fashion in Uist. Very few who get married today have a *rèiteach*, though some people still keep it up. We may mention how the couples chose each other at that time. Usually, when a man wished to get married he would look around among the women who were in his own neighbourhood, to see which one was most suitable for himself. If she was not willing to marry him, he just had to try another one and in the end he would find one. Very seldom did a man go out of his own neighbourhood at that time to find a wife.

Men and women were plentiful enough in the country; women did not go to the Lowlands to seek work as they do today, and so the population was more numerous. There were places in Uist at that time where two families lived on some of the crofts.

When a man in the family was going to marry he would build a house for himself and his young wife on part of the croft and they would go to live there. Now there were several who were courting and going out together as well, but nevertheless there was the other kind [of marriage] as well. At that time when they were courting it was usually at the woman's house that the man was to be found, and there was plenty late-night revelry going on.

Now, though a man who was courting was well-acquainted with the girl and knew that she was willing to marry him, he had first of all to ask for her hand. He had to get her own acceptance in the presence of witnesses and also her father's consent. He himself did not do the asking. He arranged with one of his friends which night he intended to go for the woman and they planned things accordingly. He had to get a bottle of whisky anyway - and on the night that had been decided he and the friend who was going with him would set off for the woman's house.

Usually the people in the house knew beforehand that he was coming that very night, and things would be prepared for him. The girl for whom he was coming would be dressed in her best clothes, and the rest of the household accordingly. But that was the case only when the man and the woman had been going out together a while before that. The man who went for the girl 'on spec' had no preparations made for him because neither the household nor the girl had any knowledge of his coming.

However, when he and his friend reached the house they went in. First of all they spent a while talking and discoursing. The woman of the house would prepare food and invite them to the table. A dram would be

passed around and the friend of the man who was asking for the girl would tell them the reason for their visit. Her father would give him his permission to marry the girl if she was willing, and a few hours were then passed with a dram and singing. Then they arranged a night for the *rèiteach*.

In some places the first night the man and his friend came to ask for the woman was called the *còrdadh* or agreement, and after the *còrdadh* came the *rèiteach*. In some places the *còrdadh* and the *rèiteach* were the same thing. And as often as not, in Uist as well, it was at the *rèiteach* that the man's friend would ask for the woman's and her father's acceptance.

...
When the people gathered they were invited to sit at the table. This was the table of the *rèiteach*. Some were chosen to sit at this table, friends and people like that. At that table the intended bridegroom's friend intimated the reason for their gathering this night. The bride's father gave his consent and his blessing to the young couple. The young couple then shook hands and a dram was passed around, and everybody at the table drank to the young couple's health.]⁴⁰

This account provides evidence that a father's permission could be sought 'on spec'; on such an occasion both the girl and her family were unprepared for the visit, and the reference to a matter-of-fact 'looking around' the neighbourhood for suitable partners suggests a distinctly unsentimental attitude to the obtaining of a wife. There is also confirmation that the participants were aware of the legal implications of the *rèiteach*; the consent of the girl, *in front of witnesses*, was one of the purposes of the ritual along with obtaining the father's permission. The two stages of the ritual are also clear, as well as the element of 'replaying' in the second meeting, where the groom's representative's statement of intent, the father's consent and blessing, the couple's symbolic act of union and the communal incorporation rite are performed for the second time. The wider community is also incorporated, with all the guests having a meal and a drink at the 'table of the *rèiteach*' even if this involves several sittings.

Further confirmation that the girl and her suitor may be complete strangers is found in the following account from Cape Breton; it is also of interest that a suitor could find himself rejected.

In a lot of cases, it might be the first time the groom had ever seen the prospective wife - and in a lot of cases it wasn't a very happy episode for the girl, but it turned out quite happily after that for most of them. [In] one particular case... it happened the girl had never seen the man brought before her this particular night for the Reiteach. This man had got the marriage garb to marry another, and she had jilted him. It was the custom then the man bought the apparel for his wife to be married in along with his own... but the young fellows wanted to have the wedding, by hook or by crook... so they concocted a scheme to take him another night and ask for the hand of a girl he had never met.⁴¹

The following song, also from Cape Breton, captures the atmosphere surrounding a matchmaking visit.

Mo Rùn an Cailin

Air faill ill eó 's na hó ro hù o
Hiùraibh o 's na hó ro hù o
Faill ill eó 's na hó ro hù o
Rùn nan cailin 's gura tù i

Latha dhomh 's mi falbh 'nam ònar
 Suibhal gharbhlach agus mòinteach,
 Nuair rànaig mise 's gun mi eòlach
 Chaidh mi thaigh nan daoine còire

Labhair bean an taighe coibhneil
 "Có as a thànaig an strainnsear?
 Deanaibh suidhe 's lasaibh coinnlean;
 Bidh sinn cridheil ré na h-oidhcheadh"

Labhair mise mar bu dual dhomh
 Ann am briathran sìobhalt', suairce,
 "C'àit' a nist a bheil a' ghruagach
 Fhuair sinn cliù oirr' mun do ghluais sinn?"

Fhir an taighe na biodh sprochd ort,
 Cha tànaig sinne gun bhotal;
 Co-dhiu gheobh 's nach fhaigh sinn tochradh
 Cha bhi deur air clàr nach cosg sinn"

"Bithinn dhut mar bhiodh do mhàthair,
 'S cinnteach mi gum biodh i blàth riut.
 Thréiginn mo chinneadh 's mo chàirdean
 'S reachainn leat thar chuain am màireach"

[The Pick of the Young Girls

Air faill ill eó 's na hó ro hù o
Hiùraibh o 's na hó ro hù o
Faill ill eó 's na hó ro hù o
Of all the young girls you're the favourite.

One day as I walked alone
 Over rough country and moors Arriving in an unfamiliar place
 I went to call on the kindly people.

The woman of the house addressed me kindly,
 'Where has the stranger come from?
 Have a seat and light the candles;
 We'll spend the night in good cheer.'

I replied according to hereditary custom
 In words both mannerly and friendly,
 "Where is the young girl
 Whose praises we heard before we set out?

My good host, be not dejected
 For we have not arrived without a bottle.
 Whether or not we obtain a dowry
 We won't leave a single drop on the table.'

"I'd treat you as would your mother;
 And surely she regards you warmly.
 I would leave behind my clan and relations
 And cross the ocean with you tomorrow."]⁴²

Although it is not clear whether the matchmaker is alone or accompanied by his charge, we may note that the place he travels to is unfamiliar and he is greeted as a stranger. As we have seen, however, the characterisation of the visitors as 'strangers' may be a convention. The visit is not made 'on spec', as information, in the form of 'praises' was available to the groom's side beforehand. The reference to 'hereditary speech' clearly alludes to a particular social 'script' appropriate to the situation, and although negotiations, including the discussion of a dowry, would not appear to be conducted allegorically or even indirectly, a degree of what may be special vigilance is suggested - the employment of words 'both mannerly and friendly.' Great stress would appear to be laid on the 'kindly' and 'friendly' nature of the visit; the bringing of a bottle of whisky is, of course, mandatory, and the final stanza would appear to indicate that the bride-to-be is well-disposed to the offer.

An account in the manuscripts of Calum MacLean suggests that the suitor and his representative could be unsure of the reception awaiting them at the woman's house.

Bho chionn uineachan air ais 'n uair a bhitheadh feadhainn a' dol a phòsadh na paidhir a' dol a phòsadh bhiodh iad daonnan a' dol a dhèanadh rèiteach. Bha sin a' dol a choimhead air a' bhean òg anns an taigh 's an robh i, co dhiubh bha i aig seirbheis na nighean fear an taighe na an t-àite 's an robh i. Ach thachair an rud seo anns an dùthaich gu h-ìosal fodhainn a seo [i.e. Ionbhar Ruaidh]. Fear Mac Phail a bh'ann is an tè a bha sùil aige oirre bha i aig seirbheis air taobh eile na h-aibhne. Fhuair e gille comh ris is ràinig iad an taigh. Thuir e ris a ghille gu fuirigheadh esa' a mach is esa' a dhol a staigh leis bha e gu math gear 'san teanga agus e a dh'fhaighinn a mach co dhiubh bha iad *welcome* gus nach robh. Chaidh an gille a staigh is chuir e an cèill a ghnòthach. Is thuir i ris gun gabhadh i an duine uair sam bith is thill e a mach.

"O!," thuir e, "nach i tha *ready*".

Chaidh am pòsadh a dhèanadh ann an ùine glè ghoirid an deadhaidh sin.

[Some time ago when people were going to get married, or a couple was

going to marry, they always had a *rèiteach*. That meant going to see the young woman in the house where she lived, whether she was at service or whether she was the daughter of the house, or wherever she was. But this affair happened in the country below us [i.e. Inver Roy]. He was a MacPhail, and the one he expected to marry was at service on the other side of the river. He got a lad to go with him and they arrived at the house. He told the lad that he would stay outside while he went in - he was very sharp-tongued - to find out whether they were 'welcome' or not. The lad went in and explained what his business was. And she told him that she would accept the man anytime, and he went back out.

'O,' said he, 'isn't she *ready*!'

The marriage was arranged shortly after that.]⁴³

We note the reluctance of the suitor to enter without an indication that his presence would be welcome. This in turn suggests that the occasion could be highly charged, particularly if the young man was not well known to the woman's family. In this example, it would appear that she does not have her family around her; she is a domestic servant. Presumably her ready acceptance is, to some extent, frowned upon; although one could speculate that this had more to do with her circumstances than any defect in her character. Unfortunately, we are not told who 'defends her' or negotiates the marriage in the absence of her own father.

The following example, from the same source, again indicates how, despite the distinctly unsentimental approach, passions ran high when it came to the personal honour of the suitor:

Bha tè eile dhen aon seòrsa ann na b'fhaide air n-adhart 's an dùthaich car mu na h-aon amannan. Chaidh fear a nunn thar a' mhonaidh is gille math leis. Chaidh iad a dh'ionnsaigh taigh an duine chòir a bha seo. Dh'innis a' fear a bha leis dè an turas air a robh iad. Thug e sùil bho mhullach gu bonn air an fhear eile is e eòlach gu leòr air. "O tha sin glè mhath," thuirt e. Cha robh am boireannach aig an taigh. "Tha sin glè mhath is tha an duine glè choltach mar a h-eil giamh ann," thuirt e. Ach a' fear a chuala seo, leum e air a' chois is a mach an dorust a bha e. Is thuirt e: "Dè tha cearr ort?"

"O thuirt e gun robh giamh annam [umam]."

"Cha duirt an duine còir nicheann dhe leithid, ach thuirt e mar a robh giamh unnat [umat]."

Chaidh an rud air adhart is phòs iad ann an ùine glè ghoirid.

[There was another one of the same kind farther on in the same country, about the same time. A man went across the moor along with a good lad. They went to the worthy man's house. The man who was with him explained what their errand was. He eyed the other man from head to foot, though he knew him well enough.

'O, that is very good,' he said. The woman was not at home. 'That is very good, and the man is very suitable unless there is any defect in him,' he said.

But the man who heard this leapt to his feet and was out of the door.

And he said, 'What is wrong with you?'

'O, he said that I had a defect'.

'The worthy man never said such a thing, but he said *unless* there was any defect in you'.

The affair went on and they got married very shortly.]⁴⁴

Although this may be viewed simply as an amusing story, the mishearing of the words produces an immediate and rather extreme response which serves to indicate that for the suitor, pride and honour were near the surface during the arduous, and potentially humiliating task of asking for a girl's hand. The father of the house exploits this to the full, looking the suitor up and down 'though he knew him well enough'.

b. Allegorical 'asking'

In the above examples the 'asking' is done directly, and, as we have seen, could lead to potentially unpleasant situations. The request for the girl could be framed allegorically, as the following account from Tìree illustrates, and perhaps one of the functions of this device is to provide a method of refusal which would preserve the dignity of the suitor, regardless of the outcome.

Eric Cregeen: Did they have in-between men to arrange marriages at all?

Donald Sinclair: Sometimes, yes... if this man were thinking of marrying this girl, his chum was coming with him, you know, a good talkative man and a clever man... and it was this talkative man... the groom-to-be took with him. It was him that was speaking first... In my younger days when a man was thinking of getting married he would tell a *sensible* man in the neighbourhood, and 'will you come with me to ask the hand of the lady?' This old witty man would go with him, and he would have a bottle of whisky of course, and maybe the old man of the house knew well enough their purpose. This old man that the bride-to-be [sic] took with him, he would turn around and he says to the old man, 'I heard that you had such and such a thing in the house'. The old man of the house would say 'Yes'. Well this man that's along wi' me is asking you will you give him that thing'. The old man in the house was *sensible* enough and he would say, 'Yes. By all means he will get whatever he asks of me. Whatever I manage to give him, there will be no refusal'. So they knew all then what happened and what was going on. And the man that was speaking on behalf of the bride they would out with a bottle and ask for glasses. And then the young lady of the house was preparing a feast.⁴⁵

The indirect nature of the request and consent is clear; the girl is represented by a 'thing' or object possessed by the father; the go-between has 'smoothed' the way for a favourable request for it by the suitor. The father's consent, which may be the 'green light' for a formal request by the suitor himself, is expressed in a formulaic phrase. Although there has been no open discussion, 'they all knew then what happened' and the pledge is sealed. There is a suggestion that the young man would not make his request without first knowing the attitude of the girl's father. This may be seen as an important function of the matchmaker; the provision of a mechanism whereby the possibility of conflict between the two parties is avoided.

In another account, the informant describes an allegorical exchange in more detail:

Bha an duine seo dol a phòsadh agus 's ann a mhuinntir baile a's a' bhaile seo a bha an tè a bha e dol a phòsadh, agus 's e ban-lleach a bh'innte air taobh a h-athar agus a màthar, faodaidh mi ràdh cuideachd, ach bha i air a togail ann an Tìreadh. Agus 's e seo an tè bha an duine dol a phòsadh.

Agus bha posta làmh ris a' fantail, agus bàrd a bha 's a' phosta cuideachd. Bha e fhèin 's am bàrd, am posta mòr aig a' chèile, 's dh'innis e don phosta gu robh e dol a phòsadh. "An tèid thu còmhla rium?" ars esan, "a dh'iarraidh a' bhoireannaich?"

"Thèid," ars am posta.

Dh'fhalbh iad le chèile a dh'ionnsaidh taigh a' bhodaich a bha seo. Shuidh iad aig teine 'gan garadh. Agus Dhia!, bha am bodach Ileach a chaidh iad far a robh e, bha e gleusta gu leòr cuideachd. Thuig e gu math gu dè bha dol a ghabhail àite. Ach thuirt am posta... 'Se saor a bh'ann gu ciùird, "Tha mi trang ag obair air a leithid seo de rud a dhèanamh," ars esan, "agus chuala mi," ars esan, "gu robh maide agaibh-sa, agus nan creiceadh sibh ... nan toireadh sibh dhomh e," ars esan, "maide eile agam fhìn," thuirt esan, "a dh'fhaotas e."

"Bheir mi sin," ars am bodach eile. "Gheibh thu agamsa maide gun teagamh, agus tha mi glè chinnteach nach eil a' dry-rotten ann. Cha chuir e dragh ort ri d'mhaireann."

'S math tha cuimhnam air banais na tè nach robh dry-rotten innte! Cha d'fhuair mi leithid a chearcan riamh nam bheatha agus a fhuair mi aig a' bhanais sin.

[This man was going to get married and the girl he was going to marry belonged to a village in this township, and she was an Islay girl on her father's side - and on her mother's too, I may say, but she was brought up in Tiree. And this was the one the man was going to marry. And there was postman staying near him, and the postman was a poet as well. He and the poet... the postman - were friendly, and he told the postman that he was going to get married.

'Will you go with me,' says he, 'to ask for the girl?'

'Yes,' says the postman.

They went off together to this old man's house. They sat down at the fire to warm themselves. And God! the old man from Islay whom they went to see he was pretty cunning too. Fortunately, he understood what was going to take place. But the postman - he was a joiner to trade - he said, 'I'm busy working at such and such a thing,' says he, 'and I am short' says he, 'of wood, and I heard,' says he, 'that you had a piece of timber, and if you would sell, would you give me it?' says he. 'I'd be much obliged to you.' 'I will indeed,' says the other old man. 'You will certainly get a piece of wood from me, and I am very sure that there is no dry-rot in it. It will not bother you as long as you live.' I well remember the wedding of the one who had no dry-rot in her! I never in my life got as many hens as I got at that wedding.]⁴⁶

It will be noted the the matchmaker is a mobile member of the community - the postman -

as well as a 'poet' and a joiner to trade. We will recall the division of the Bulgarian examples into, for example, 'traders' or 'fellow-farmers' and we may consider this account from Tíree as an example of the 'traders' type, in this case based on actual fact; the matchmaker really is a tradesman. As well as the obvious symbolism of the two halves of the 'couple', and their union providing mutual support for a 'roof over their heads', the interdependence of the two families, and the community in general, is emphasised in the father's willingness to help the 'buyer' at his door. The tradition of mutual aid, or 'thigging', is an ancient one. A seventeenth century observer notes:

To thig is to beg assistance of Friends which is very ordinary among persons of every Quality. Men thig horses and corn; women thig cows, sheep and goats. When young men of the common sort are to plenish they thig corn, both in seed time and harvest.⁴⁷

J.L. Campbell adds a reference to the poem *Mor an feidhm freagairt na bhfaighdheach*, 'to answer the demands for aid... is a big effort'.⁴⁸ Besides the assistance extended to the unlucky crofter 'thiggin the seed', Walter Gregor notes that the tradition also applied to a young man setting up a farm, where 'it was usual for friends and neighbours to lend a helping hand. Aid was given in ploughing... they contributed at least part of the grain to sow the fields.' This may lend meaning to the nature of the enquiry at the door of the girl, when those outside appeal for help in the completion or donation of some object connected with 'building a house' or agriculture. Gregor also notes the practice in connection with weddings; 'in the interval between the final contract of marriage and its celebration the young women were busy getting in order all her *providan* for her future home. One or more days were given to the *thiggin* of wool from her friends and

neighbours.⁴⁹ The informant knew of no other approach other than asking for the other half of a couple. Another account of this method of asking is provided by Morag MacLeod:

When the company has had a dram out of the bottle, tea follows, after which the friend contrives to introduce the subject of their visit, in the best form possible. If he is a man of wit, or eloquence, he has the advantage in the use of these gifts, in discharging his delicate task... After a few words by way of introduction, the friend went on thus:- 'We have been building a house, and have got it all ready for the roofing, but we find we are short of the leg of a couple, to match another we have already got. We know you have got such a thing to spare, and as we are wishful to have the best that can be had, and being assured of the good quality of those you have got beside you, we have come to request the favour from you. If you can see your way to oblige us, you will contribute greatly to our house and to our happiness.' The girl's father replied in such terms as he considered suitable, signifying his willingness to meet their request. Thereupon, the suitor's friend (having an eye to the **tochar**), further said, 'We are very much obliged to you, and highly delighted to get the couple leg, but, of course, it will be somewhat expensive to take it out of here, and place it where it is to be put, besides, that afterwards, everything would require to be kept in a condition worthy of the excellent couple, that are to be over the house.' When the consent of the parents or guardians of the girl has been obtained, the *dram* is put round again, and the young couple are betrothed, by taking each other's hand, retaining the hold, while they share the glass between them. The glass having been handed to the young woman first, she drinks a portion of it and then hands it to the young man who drinks what she has left.⁵⁰

This account suggests how complex and flexible the allegorical exchange could be; the suitor's representative first praises the 'quality' of the stock in the father's possession, then, once consent has been obtained, shifts his emphasis to the *tocher* - the expense of relocating the goods and the future 'condition' of their joint project. This clearly shows that it was possible to discuss another potential source of conflict - the dowry - allegorically, as was noted in Bulgaria. In his stressing of the father's role in ensuring the future prosperity of the pair, the device of the 'couples' as symbolising marriage as joint work and mutual

aid can be seen to apply both to the young people about to be united and to the two families, who are also embarking on a future together. The 'couples' motif occurs again in an account in the Dewar Manuscripts of an encounter on the mainland:

There were, some time, persons of the Clan Vicar dwelling in a place called Dail-chruinneachd, in Glen Ara, and they were desirous that their son should marry the daughter of a man of the Mackellars, who dwelt in Mam in Glen Shira. Young Mackellar in Kilblaan was courting the same maiden. Macvicar of Dail-chruinneachd and his son and others along with them went to see if a marriage arrangement could be made between young Macvicar and the maiden... They knocked at the door and Mackellar cried, 'Who is there at the door?' Macvicar replied, 'A friend. Let us in'. Mackellar said, 'If you are friends I will let you in,' so he opened the door and let them in... One of those that accompanied Macvicar took a bottle of whisky out of his pocket and said to the goodwife, 'Have you a quaich?' She said, 'Yes,' and she got a quaich for him. He filled the quaich and offered it to her, saying, 'Here, goodwife, drink to us.' She said, 'But I shall know first before I drink, why I am going to drink?' Macvicar of Dail-chruinneachd said, 'We are building a house in Dail-chruinneachd and putting a couple in it; we have one side of the couple, and we have heard that Mackellar of Mam has a tree that would make the other side of the couple: so we have come to try whether he will give it to us.' Mackellar inquired of what kind of wood the half-couple that he had was. 'It is oak,' said Macvicar. 'The couple that I have,' remarked Mackellar, 'is ash, and these two kinds of wood do not fit each other. Oak lasts much longer than ash'. 'Ash,' rejoined Macvicar, 'lasts long also, if it is kept dry, but I rather suspect that your half-couple is oak too. I do not think you have looked after it properly'. The man of the bottle inquired of the good wife where Euphemia her daughter was. The goodwife replied 'Euphemia has gone to bed. What have you to say to her?' 'I wish,' said he, 'to give her a quaich-full of whisky, as it is going at all events. Where is she?' The goodwife said, 'She is in that room there then,' extending her hand in the direction of the door of the room. 'It would be better for her to rise that we might see her,' said Macvicar's son. Effie arose and put on her clothes; and the man who had the bottle and the young Macvicar took the lamp and went into the room where Effie was. The man of the bottle first gave the full of a quaich of the whisky to Effie and he conversed for a little with her in a low tone; then he went off and left herself and Macvicar together, and these were for a while speaking low and whispering to one another. During this time Dail-chruinneachd and Mam agreed about the piece of timber that was to make the half-couple.

Young Macvicar and Effie now came out of the room and sat with

the rest of the company. 'Oove, Oove! Have you got up?' said her mother to Effie. 'Yes,' said Effie. 'I have been hearing much merriment among you, and I am for having my share of it'. Said he that was putting round the whisky, 'We are for putting another couple in the house, and it is young Macvicar of Dail-chruinneachd that we are going to put in one side of it; and how would it please you, goodman and goodwife, were Effie your daughter to be the other side of the couple? Would you give her?' The old folk did not say a word. The divider of the whisky then said to the goodman, 'How would it please you, goodman, to give your daughter to the son of Macvicar of Dail-chruinneachd?' 'She is there herself,' said the goodman, 'and ask her, first, if she is willing'. Macvicar's spokesman then said to Effie, 'And are you willing yourself, Effie?' Effie replied, 'If I had the goodwill of my parents, I should be very willing myself'. Her mother rejoined, 'If you agree yourselves I will not put between you'. 'And, indeed, I will not between them either,' said her father.

Then they fixed a day for the agreement, and the place they fixed on for the agreement-meeting was the top of the moor between Mam and Dail-chruinneachd, where people were wont to cast the peats.

The day of the agreement had come; and the two parties... with their friends met at the place appointed. Each party had a horse and creels with them, carrying a cask of whisky and plenty of food. They sat on the *grianan* where they were wont to spread the peats. A round of whisky was put about, and the terms of the agreement were declared. Many words were spoken and the details of the agreement were settled in a manner satisfactory to both parties. The two young folk were brought before the company and asked if they were of their own accord willing to marry. They both said they were; and they joined hands in the presence of the company. So the agreement was made. Then they fixed the day for the marriage, and invited all those who were at the agreement to come to the wedding.⁵¹

The story ends with a mass fight between the supporters of Mackellar of Mam, the girl's family, and those of Mackellar of Kilblaan, the family of the spurned suitor 'who had been courting... Effie before Macvicar'. The entry exchange at the door and the allegorical exchange take place between the two fathers. The proceedings are, however, presided over by the 'man of the bottle', the suitor's non-kin representative, who addresses the woman of the house and the girl herself, but not her father until the moment of consent. During the preliminaries the two fathers appear to be silent. This may be an example of a young man

represented by two intermediaries; his father, the serious, 'male' principle, duty-bound to expressing vigour and persistence, whose verbal contribution symbolically joins the two together; the other the 'feminine'; conciliatory, more affable and sociable, whose duty is to physically bring the couple together through a 'master-of-ceremonies' role, less dependent on verbal skill than ritual expertise, for example the procuring of a quail. Their counterparts are the girl's father, who expresses robust resistance symbolically through verbal jousting, and her mother, who acts as facilitator, physically bringing about the meeting between the two.

The girl's mother does not know why she is asked to drink; this may be true, but given that the young couple know one another, and the unusually late hour of the visit, we may assume she has at least an inkling. We will recall earlier examples from Brittany where those 'inside' affect not to understand the reason for the visit, and one from Poland in which the matchmakers say 'We are eating and drinking, but we don't know why'. In the Borders of Scotland, on being invited to a wedding 'it was good manners to pretend that the object of their call was quite unsuspected, and the simple little fraud was kept up until the couple rose to take their leave'.⁵² The exchange between the fathers shows that refusal was possible within the allegorical framework; oak and ash 'do not fit each other'; in other words, it would not be a match of like with like. Macvicar's reply gives him the upper hand, and the onward movement of the encounter reveals Mackellar's objection to have been merely a ritual hindering of progress. The editor of the manuscripts is surely mistaken when he comments 'Mackellar at first does not understand what the speaker has in view'.⁵³ The consent of the girl is heavily stressed, and this may be further underlined by the

couple's silence when the proposition is first formally put to them allegorically. A direct question follows, which elicits the response that the girl must be asked 'first, if she is willing'. Her response is formulaic, properly deferring to her parents, who in turn offer not direct assent, which, like the girl's ready consent, may be taboo, but a passive statement of non-intervention.

This meeting is equivalent to the *rèiteach beag*, the 'agreement', *rèiteach mòr*, being fixed for a later date. It is of interest that this takes place outside, on a high, neutral space halfway between the two 'camps'. At Lochbroom, Wester Ross, the two camps observed one another with mutual suspicion:

Owing to distance, a trysting place is arranged, where the bride's party meets the clerical celebrant. The bridegroom's house is a little further away than the bride's home from the trysting place. While the bride's party is at breakfast on the morning of the wedding day, a scout is sent out every few minutes to see what is doing at the bridegroom's house, and to guard against surprise by him and his party. The bridegroom's party in the same way are watching the bride's home. When the bride and her party set out, there immediately arises an appearance of great stir and bustle about the bridegroom's house. Presently he and his party are seen to come out, and, as though they were in hot haste to overtake the bride's party, they take a straight line through fields and over streams and fences. They do not overtake the party in front, however, but keep about two hundred yards behind. When the bride's party sits down to partake of a refreshment by the way, the pursuers still keep at the same respectful distance, and sit down to take their refreshments by themselves. While waiting for the minister at the trysting place, the two parties keep at a distance the one from the other, and even when they are obliged to approach for the performance of the ceremony, they still keep distinct. Immediately on conclusion of the ceremony by which bride and bridegroom are made one, the two parties mingle together and are associated throughout the remainder of the day's proceedings.⁵⁴

In this account we will note the implicit threat of kidnap as the bride's party 'guard against surprise'. The maintenance of spatial boundaries, whether in the open air, over a threshold,

or at different ends of a table, is a recurring feature of the ritual and is more fully dealt with below. The 'casting of the peats', it should be added, is a luck-bringing practice commonly associated with weddings and 'such as goes about any other work as Hunting, Fishing &c.'⁵⁵ Although the supposed dispute surrounding the material suitable for the 'couples' is between oak and ash, other evidence suggests that the choice of wood may have a greater significance than is at first apparent. In describing the construction of a 'black-house', Alexander MacDonald states that "the couplings were a certain crooked form of tree from the forest, called 'na suidheachan,' or 'na maideanceamhail'".⁵⁶ *Suidhe* is the 'beam or supporter of a house'; *maidesuidhe* is 'the couple of a house' and *suidheachadh* has the meaning 'settling, arbitration, betrothing, arranging terms of marriage'.⁵⁷ This may explain why the couples were closely associated with weddings, quite apart from the more obvious symbolism of joint work. It was also held that roofing materials must not touch the ground when they are being transported; a further indication of their special status.⁵⁸ A similar taboo surrounded the carrying of the whisky used for sealing the agreement, which must not be allowed to fall, and the holy water used for sprinkling in the house.⁵⁹ There may also be a link between the couples and the sacred 'need-fire' or virgin flame, produced by friction between two pieces of wood. The ritual kindling 'was one of the main ceremonies at the great fire-festivals [and] the most potent of all charms to circumvent the powers of darkness, and was resorted to in any imminent or actual calamity, or to ensure success in any important undertaking'.⁶⁰

Thomas Pennant, in his Tour in Scotland of 1769 describes another hill-betrothal similar to that described in the Dewar Manuscripts:

The courtship of the highlander... after privately obtaining the consent of the fair, he formally demands of the father. The lover and his friends assemble on a hill allotted for that purpose and one of them is dispatched to obtain permission and wait upon the daughter; if he is successful, he is again sent to invite the father and his friends to ascend the hill and partake of a whisky cask, which is never forgot: the lover advances, takes his future Father-in-law by the hand, and plights his troth, and the Fair-one is surrendered up to him.⁶¹

The hill 'allotted for that purpose' is most likely a sacred mound, common all over the country, and the site for regular assemblies, the performance of religious rites, the enacting of laws and punishment. The courts of the Brehons, judges, were held on the side of the hill. These sacred lands were the *neimheadh*, 'the name given to a Druidical grove in which there was a stone shrine, a magic tree or well, or a fairy mound'.⁶² We may compare this with the ancient sanctuary and assembly place of Tailtiu in Ireland, linked with sacred and secular marriage. The latter were celebrated at the *Tulach na Coibche*, the 'mound of the buying', where the bride-price was paid, and where irregular marriages continued until 1770.⁶³ Moorland between two communities was also used for betrothals; a Reverend Lamont of Strath reported that 'so notable for matchmaking was a moor between Strath and Sleat, that on the O.S. map it is still called *Airidh na suiridh*, the bothy of lovemaking'.⁶⁴ The following account describes another Highland betrothal of the eighteenth century, where the notion of the two camps being in a state of military readiness is made explicit.

The marriage contracts of the Highlanders were settled in a singular manner. The men of both families assembled, attended by a number of their friends, and the chieftain or landlord was commonly present to do honour to his dependants. While it was the custom to go armed on all occasions, they sometimes went to the place of meeting in a sort of military parade, with pipers playing before them. A hill or rising ground

was always chosen for this purpose, generally halfway between the parties. As soon as the bridegroom and his retinue appeared, an embassy was despatched to them from the other party, demanding to know their errand, and whether they meant peace or war. The messenger was told in turn that they attended their friend, who came to demand a maid in marriage, naming the young woman. This being reported, her father and those of his attendants who were advanced in years went aside and considered the demand in form, though that matter was commonly settled beforehand. After weighing the young man's circumstances and connections, they sent to let him know that her father agreed to the match. This, however, produced a second message from the bridegroom, intimating that he expected a portion with the bride, upon which a conference was proposed and accepted. The two companies joined, and many compliments passed between them... business began... there was no small address shown, and much time spent, in adjusting the articles; though, perhaps, a parcel of sheep or goats, a few cows, or a horse or two, were the subject in dispute... A people who transact their business verbally are commonly more tenacious of their word than those among whom writ or oath is requisite. In such a case a breach of promise would subject the party that failed to infamy and shame. And besides, in the Highlands, where the laws were little powerful, he would have been liable to private vengeance...⁶⁵

We note the ritual quality of the supposed martial encounter; although the principal business is 'commonly settled beforehand', the bride's family demand to know why the groom's party have assembled, and what their intentions are. This is reminiscent of ritual formulas previously noted, and we suspect this meeting amounts to a conspicuously public, and rather grand, 'replaying' of the earlier, more intimate encounter. The posture of the bride's side is one of strength; it is they who ask if it is to be peace or war, knowing, of course, that in this contest it is they who must inevitably 'lose'. We may compare the structure of the encounter with the dialogues described above; there is a form of dialogue between the intermediaries of the two camps which takes place at a neutral venue with a 'safe' distance between the two parties. Communication is through intermediaries, and the whole conducted in the idiom of the preliminary to a battle. In this ritual 'tug-of-war',

honour dictates that the bride's party make a strong showing; and it is just this - a show which presupposes an equality which in reality does not exist. The groom's party will carry off the prize; the only 'dispute' lies in the numbers of sheep or goats to be 'adjusted'.

With regard to agreements in more modern times, Isabel Grant notes of the *rèiteach* 'this interview is nowadays a pleasant formality but there are older traditions of hard bargaining and the interview sometimes took place outside and was attended by a number of male kinsfolk'.⁶⁶

Promises are also recorded as being exchanged in another liminal space; handfasting through a holed stone where the man made his choice solely on the appearance of the woman's hand.⁶⁷ Holed stones also feature in secular marriage in Scotland; Rogers notes that:

lovers pledged themselves to mutual fidelity by joining hands through the perforated Stone of Odin, near Loch Stennis, in Orkney. Even elders of the Church recognised the sacredness of the vow. The married women of Srathearn passed their hands through the holes of the bore stone of Gask, to obtain children.⁶⁸

Another liminal space, the joining of two rivers, is also noted in connection with handfasting. Guthrie observes 'a spot at the junction of waters known as the black and white Esk, was remarkable in former times for an annual fair... it was customary for the unmarried of both sexes to choose a companion, according to their fancy, with whom to live until that time next year'.⁶⁹ Vows were also exchanged across running water: 'When the damsel had accepted her lover's offer, the pair proceeded to the nearest stream, and there washing their hands in the current, vowed constancy with their hands clasped across the brook'.⁷⁰ Buying and selling may also have taken place over a liminal space; for

example, it was a held that a bargain made over running water was indissoluble, and in the following description it would appear that a threshold was the location: 'In buying a Horse the Seller holds him by the Bridle without and the Buyer within with a wisp in his hand, wich the seller giveth him going sun-gate about [deiseal]'.⁷¹

The following account of a *rèiteach* from Marion MacLeod of Lewis describes the couple being united across the centre of a table, the space carefully delineated, as in earlier examples:

At the *rèiteach* the prospective bridegroom chose a speaker from the community, usually a friend, to ask the bride's father for the daughter's hand in marriage. At the actual *rèiteach* a long table was prepared which stretched the whole length of the house. The prospective bride and groom sat at opposite ends of the table at the head. After grace was said, the prospective bride and groom were told to stand up and clasp hands across the table while the *gille-suiridhich*, that was the man who spoke for the groom, addressed the bride's father asking him if he had any objections to the marriage taking place. On being told that everything was approved there was great applause.⁷²

The search for the other half of a 'couple' is an example of the 'incomplete object' device, noted earlier in connection with the tradition in Bulgaria. Morag MacLeod knows of another example, although without detail:

A person well-known for his wit (usually an old man) was chosen to represent the groom, and another to represent the bride's parents. I wish I could remember details of one in Scalpay when the ploy was that a weaver was looking for yarn with which to finish the tweed he was making.⁷³

Accounts from elsewhere in Scotland provide further evidence of the 'asking' conducted in the idiom of buying and selling, or thigging, though not employing the 'incomplete object' device. Peigi Grant, born in Sheildaig, Torridon, describes her memory of the procedure at a betrothal:

The *rèiteach* was as big a thing as the wedding... but I don't think they were such open affairs. I think they were friends of the bride and bridegroom that went to the *rèiteach*. It was to ask the father for the bride, for his consent... they approached it in an out of the way habit. They said 'I believe you have a very precious jug' or something in the house like that, and they would go on arguing about this jug, or a car, or something they had. They would never say the girl first - until the whole thing was ironed out and came to an agreement. And then the bride was taken out. I think she was in the other room, and she was taken in and handed to the man... And there was singing.. a little party.⁷⁴

Although it is not explicitly stated, the most likely interpretation of this account is that the young man's party came to negotiate for the possession of the 'jug' or other object. The 'thing' that needed to be 'ironed out' was surely the financial or material arrangements; in this case what was effectively a 'bride-price'. It is to be noted that the girl is hidden, as in many other European analogues, and that she is brought out and symbolically handed over, signifying nothing less than a change in ownership. The informant stresses that 'they would never say the girl first'; a clear indication of the taboo surrounding any direct reference to the main parties involved. It is of interest that the informant mentions the possibility of using a car to stand for the girl; a remark which places the existence of the ritual firmly in the twentieth century.

An account from 1895 by Constance Taylor describes the custom in Ullapool where the young man's party arrive expressing the wish to buy an animal. They are shown a 'selection'; a dramatic sequence which corresponds to the ritual refusing of the 'false brides' noted elsewhere:

The betrothal takes place some weeks before the time fixed for the marriage. The relations and friends assemble at the house of the bride's father: and last of all the bride-groom arrives in the character of a would-be purchaser of a cow or a sheep. He is assured that he has come to the right place to have his want supplied; and one by one the sisters and young

friends of the bride are presented to him, he making a point of finding some fault with every one, until at length the bride herself appears, when he declares himself entirely satisfied and anxious to conclude the bargain. Whisky is then brought in, and two glasses of it are poured out for the couple, the woman only raising the glass to her lips, while the man empties them both. A man not a native of the place gave me lately a different version of this custom, in which the bridegroom, instead of coming to buy, comes to seek a lost lamb.⁷⁵

We may note from this account a ritual sealing of the contract which differs from most in that the girl merely *pretends* to drink from the glass. This strikes the observer as surprising; the sharing of the cup is a powerful symbol, and it seems that most probably the girl would have been obliged to drink, her avoidance tantamount to an insulting refusal. It may be that the custom had changed in the more temperate Victorian era, or that the author was sparing the reader the blushes which would doubtless accompany an account of what may have been considered un-ladylike behaviour.

The refusal sequence itself is also of some interest in that it appears that only young women featured. The bride's sisters and friends could plausibly take the bride's place in actuality; they are 'false' in that they are rivals shunned in favour of the bride, rather than 'impossibles'; women which custom dictates must be refused, such as the old woman, widow and very young girl noted in the Breton custom; a question that is dealt with in detail below. We will also note that Constance Taylor mentions use of the 'lost animal' formula in another district. This introduces another of the allegorical devices associated with the *rèiteach*, and it will be recalled that this was the only device noted in the Breton tradition. Symington Grieve describes the tradition on Colonsay and Oronsay:

A short time before the couple intend to get married, the prospective bridegroom makes an appointment to meet the parents of the bride at their house to obtain their consent. Upon the night that is fixed, a company

generally attends at the home of the wooer. When he starts upon his errand he has old shoes and burning peat thrown after him for good luck. He generally attends the place of meeting with several of his friends. Upon their arrival they are asked to be seated. Then one of the young man's party begins by informing the parents of the young woman that they have come a long way in search of something their young friend has lost. It might be a quey, or a hog, and he would express the hope that he might find it where they then were. It is now the turn of a friend of the parents of the young woman to speak. He would ask what kind of marks were upon the beast they had lost. This information having been given, the friend of the parents would reply that there was a stray beast among their stock, and that they would produce it to see if they could identify it. The stray beast was then introduced, who was one of a number of young women who had come to join in the fun. The lady was severely criticised by the would-be bridegroom and his friends. One lady after another is produced and criticised in the same way and set aside, until at last the right lady is brought forward, when no fault is found with her and she receives nothing but praise. The betrothal then took place, the young man, taking the right hand of the young woman, gave her a kiss which sealed the engagement. The future bride then sat down beside her young man at a table among her friends.⁷⁶

In this example, non-kin representatives begin the ritual, the young man's spokesman employing the motif of the 'long journey' as well as the 'lost animal' formula. The request for a description requires the expression in zoomorphic terms of the girl's distinguishing features. The family affirm the presence of a 'stray'; the girl is evidently already in transitional state, that is to say agreement has already been reached, and on this 'night fixed' she is presented as an alien creature who does not belong in their 'stock'. After the refusal of the 'false brides', she signifies the joining of the young man's 'stock' by taking her place beside him. The refusal sequence is 'fun'; the other women have come to the house to 'join in', and it is not only the young man's representative who 'severely criticises' but the would-be bridegroom himself. The rejected women are 'produced', perhaps by the girl's representative, and 'set aside'; presumably remaining in the room to form a growing

audience at this dramatic show of verbal skill. The 'right lady' is found to be beyond criticism and is praised by all.

Grieve confirms the suggestion made above that secular marriage existed partly as a result of the lack of clergy to carry out a religious service. The islanders choice of location is also significant:

After the Reformation, when there were no clergy of any persuasion in Colonsay and Oronsay, the people had to devise other means of tying the nuptial knot... instead of continuing to use one or other of the old churches which were still standing [they] took the strange course of reverting to what was probably the custom in pre-Christian times. It may have been that among the islanders there was a strong element of the Cruithne who may never have entirely abandoned their claim as magicians, as descendants of the Tuatha de Danann. It was with that people that the green mounds of sand, known as *Sithean*, were associated originally... it is therefore not very surprising that the people of the islands living in a superstitious age threw overboard the teaching and practice of the Christian Church. They could think of no way more binding upon the individual, as regards marriage, than to have it celebrated in a site supposed to be the dwelling place of the mysterious people. It was a distinct reversion towards paganism, but it was accepted and adhered to until the beginning of last century... The spot chosen for these island marriages was at Sithean Mor, Ardskenish, Colonsay, which was the largest mound of a group of three. As far as I can ascertain, the custom regarding the going to the Sithean Mor was similar to what now prevails in going to or from the church. However, the actual ceremony at the Sithean, without priest or parson, was simplicity itself. The man and woman married themselves by publically agreeing in the presence of their friends to take each other as man and wife. Such a ceremony would be quite valid in Scotland in the present time.⁷⁷

This description is further evidence that sacred mounds were used for marriages, and Grieve asserts that this was revived between the mid-sixteenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. We may speculate that the betrothal custom described above also formed part of the pre-Christian marriage rites, and that while the location of the public declaration may have shifted, the betrothal remained an essential and more intimate,

binding 'pre-contract', which was, in a sense, 'replayed' in front of the whole community at a later meeting. This arrangement thus resembles analogues outlined above where a public 're-asking' followed a private, but perhaps equally binding agreement.

Another allegorical device, previously noted elsewhere and found in connection with the *rèiteach* is that of the 'transplanted object'; the girl is requested to form part of the 'stock' of the young man's party. Dolly Wallace from Harris, interviewed by Margaret Bennett, recalls the tradition, which she revived for the wedding of her daughter in 1985:

DW: What I remember about it is it was an informal gathering where the bride's hand was asked for in marriage. A third party asked... He talked about something quite different. He didn't ask for the woman. When Morag's *rèiteach* was here Iain MacDonald from Milivaig asked for her hand, it was a ewe lamb... He got up and he said that he had heard that Jim [her father] had a ewe lamb that was inclined to stray, and that he would be glad to take the ewe lamb off his hands and put it into a safer place, and that we wouldn't need to worry about the ewe lamb then because it would be in his own fold as it were. Jim replied 'Yes', he was quite happy to let him have the ewe lamb because he knew it was going into good hands.

MB: Back to the first *rèiteach* that you were at in Harris, can you remember what was asked for there?

DW: No!, but it was something on the same lines. He would have - whatever it was he had asked for, a boat or whatever was the case, he would have replied that he had this boat that had never been used by anybody else... and that he was welcome to take her, and sail her in calm waters... I suppose it goes by the trade of the bride's family. I was at one earlier but I was only eight. And that was my cousin that was getting married... It ran along the same lines. Her father was asked for the bride and he replied 'Yes'. Now I'm sure it was a sheep that was asked for there; he was a crofter.⁷⁸

The motif of the 'ewe lamb which strays' may suggest a perception of the young woman as having begun the process of moving towards the 'fold' of another; a state of transition, explicitly linked with danger, or as we shall see, the notion of being 'unsettled'. Alternatively, it may reflect a personality trait; a rebellious spirit, for example. The

allegorical device is flexible enough to permit both readings; the articulation of the mingled resistance and anxiety of leaving the safety of the family, common to many examples above; or as a device which reveals information specific to the individual context. These two interpretations could, of course, occur simultaneously. Similarly, the 'boat which has never been sailed' enables the girl's virginity to be affirmed without the offence such intimate enquiry would cause if directly expressed. We recall the brutal closing *coup de grâce* of the Breton poet: 'Mar dé guerc'h roït-y/ Ma ne quet mirit-y' 'Is she a virgin? Bring her./ Is she no longer? Keep her'.⁷⁹ By contrast, the allegorical device in the *rèiteach* provides the vehicle for the communication of this delicate information without the young man's party being obliged to request it; an enquiry which, even in past centuries, could easily have been construed as a grave insult to the whole family. The girl's father can also use the formula as a way to warn the suitor that he expects the destination to be 'calm'; an expression, perhaps, of kin solidarity which will follow the girl wherever she is 'sailed'. It is plausible that the 'boat never sailed' could mean 'never married'; but since remarriage was rare in Highland society until recent times, this reading must be considered unlikely.

Another device noted is the suitor's party presenting themselves as travellers seeking accommodation. Alexander MacDonald describes the betrothal custom in Glenmoriston:

Our wedding of the olden time was invariably preceded by the 'contract' - an institution of long standing and great importance. This function took place in the house of the bride's father, to which the bridegroom and a small party of chosen friends repaired, usually on a certain appointed Friday evening... One of the party, probably a near relative, introduced himself and his companions as wanderers, seeking a night's lodgings, and the bride's father, if matters were agreeable to all concerned, received the would-be strangers hospitably. In due time a mere form of contract was

entered into by the prospective bride and bridegroom, in the course of which proceeding they for the first time that evening saw each other. On those occasions, as a general custom, there was excellent cheer, all of which was supposed to be provided by the bridegroom. It was not common to have a dance at those contracts, but songs were sung, tales were told, and there was also much good-natured fun.⁸⁰

Although the girl's father is expecting the visit, it having been 'appointed' in advance, the suitor and his supporters present themselves as strangers. We may note that the groom-to-be has a spokesman, and does not make the request for entry himself. Entry would appear to be conditional on 'matters' being 'agreeable to all concerned', which itself presupposes that refusal was a possibility. This mode of 'asking' since it takes place on the threshold, is much more in the character of an entry ritual than the allegorical devices outlined above, where entry itself is not explicitly requested; indeed, in many it seems to have been a foregone conclusion. The motif of the 'wanderers' is, however, as flexible as other devices; if negotiations fail, the father could conceivably state that there was no room inside for the party, and they could thus be turned away without causing offence. One feels, however, that for this to be possible, discussions would have to be carried out using some indirect formula from which the father could then go on to make his refusal; reverting to the allegorical mode from direct matter-of-fact negotiation would defeat the purpose of the custom. Since MacDonald gives no indication of the nature of these discussions, this must remain open to interpretation. In all examples of betrothal customs where the father must be 'asked', the groom's party find themselves in an 'inferior' position despite being the dominant 'male principle'; this is acknowledged through ritual submission to testing and other trials, and the provision of whisky being their responsibility. It may be that a request for entry as travellers expresses the due amount of humility, without sacrificing the

equality of status this implies - to present themselves as beggars would, of course, be quite impossible. The Breton *bazvalan* and the Welsh bard begin by apologising for their lack of skill; they do not expect immediate entry and resistance must be made by those inside if they consider their honour worth defending; in the same way the 'wanderers' of Glenmoriston adopt a deferential, passive posture, as tradition demands. There is a clear link between this spatial relationship and examples in which the visitors - those 'outside' and 'below' are 'unrecognised' by those 'inside' or 'above'. We may compare this to the near-universal custom of the groom's party being kept waiting at the church, or a race or other device to ensure the bride's party arrive there first. We also note from this example that it is not until business is concluded that the couple are allowed to see each other; a clear statement of priorities and further indication of continuous pressure exerted by the girl's family. A possible relationship between entry rituals and traditions of hospitality will be discussed below.

Some accounts of betrothals make no explicit reference to ritual entry, ritual exchange or a 'false bride' sequence, but contain elements suggestive of these. One example is from Roderick Mackillop of Berneray, who describes how the girl's father deliberately made it difficult for those who had come for his daughter, the conscious prolongation of the event fuelled by more than a love of language and the force of tradition:

Chaidh Seonaidh Choinnich sìos a thaigh Sheumais Thormoid. Agus ò, bha feadhainn eile ann cuideachd, ach 'se m'athair agus Tormod Lachlainn 's iad an fheadhainn ... Agus nuair a dh'fhoighneachdadh m'athair de Sheumas, dè na bh'aige a chrodh, 's chanadh Seumas, 's dòcha, gu robh sia mairt aige. 'S theireadh Tormod Lachlainn nach robh sin ceart idir, nach robh crodh idir aige, air dìreach airson a dhèanamh doirbh dha nighean

Sheonaidh Choinnich fhaighinn airson a pòsadh. Sin a nist mar a bhiodh oidhche a' rèitich. 'Sann. Agus bhiodh am botal a' dol mu chuairt. 'S mar bu mhotha gheibheadh na bodaich 's ann ... 's ann a b'fheàrr a bhiodh an spòrs. Sin agad a nist a' rud a theireadh iad ri Oidhche a Rèitich. Ach cha chuala mi riamh bodach sam bith, ann am Bearnaraigh co-dhiù, nach tug a nighean dhan fhear a thigeadh g' a h-iarraidh.

[Seonaidh Choinnich went down to Seumas Thormoid's house. Oh! there were others there too, but it was my father and Tormod Lachlainn were the ones... And when my father would ask James what cattle he had, James would say perhaps that he had six cows. Tormod Lachlainn would say that was not right at all, that he had no cattle at all, just to make it difficult for him to get Seonaidh Choinnich's daughter in marriage. That, now, is how the betrothal night was. And the bottle would go the rounds. And the more the old men drank the better the sport. That now is what was called the betrothal night. But I never heard, in Berneray anyway, of any old man who did not give his daughter to the man who came to ask for her.]⁸¹

An example from the MacLagan manuscripts alludes to the formula and indirect preamble which, as we have seen, commonly preceded the formal asking:

Both in North and South Uist, the common custom is when a person wishes to obtain the consent for marriage, of the parents or guardians of his intended, he arranges to come to their house on a certain night for the purpose. This night is called *Oidhche an rèite*. He brings along with him a friend or two. Their coming of course, is known beforehand and they are received cordially and treated to supper. By and bye one of the friends who has accompanied the Bridegroom expresses himself highly gratified by the kind entertainment, but would like to know what does it mean. This leads to freer conversation, and after a little beating about according to the mood and ingenuity of the party the object of the gathering is allowed to eke out. The friends of the young man indicate their hearty good will, and the friends of the young woman indicate that they have no objection, whereupon a glass of the whisky that has already been doing duty is handed to the young man, who drinks the half of it, and then hands it to his intended, in token of his willingness to share his lot with her; she drinks the other half in token of her acceptance, and forthwith they shake hands and the contract is complete.⁸²

We note once again the formula expressing surprise, here virtually identical to the Polish example 'we are eating and drinking but we don't know why'. More indirect discussion is

necessary before the purpose of their visit 'ekes' out. This account is a vivid example of the obligation to avoid haste; the visitors must endure a meal and varying levels of discourse, scrupulously avoiding the main topic, before this can be raised. It is of interest that the informant stresses that 'of course' they are expected, the meal is prepared in advance and the groom's party are received cordially. This suggests that although the informant realises his account resembles the confrontation of relative strangers, he is at pains to point out that this is not the case. In the following account from Lewis, again taken from the MacLagan manuscripts, the same emphasis is made:

On the contracting night (Oidhche na reite) the bridegroom, accompanied by one or two of his most intimate friends goes to the bride's home, where, of course, the fact of his coming is known beforehand, as well as the object of his coming, and they are prepared to receive him. There is tea and a dram, and when they get the length of talking about the business of marriage, and it is understood that all are agreed, the principal actor on the bridegroom's part - usually the one who is to be the best-man at the wedding, when it comes, takes the bridegroom's right-hand and holds it up. Similarly the chief actor for the bride - usually the one who is to be best-maid, lifts the bride's right-hand and places it in the bridegroom's. This is called Car laimh.⁸³

Although ritual language would appear to be absent, the pressure to avoid unseemly haste is obvious. This account is remarkable for the presence of a female ceremonial counterpart to the best-man or master-of-ceremonies role. While the presence of female 'supporters' was noted in several international analogues, this is the only instance where the moment of union is effected by third party, non-kin representatives of each sex.

Similar rules of engagement applied to marriage customs elsewhere in Scotland. In the Borders, 'bidding' the guests was accompanied by the same awkward decorum:

After the 'crying' came the 'bidding', when the shy young groom, accompanied by his equally shy best man, had to go round inviting his

relatives and friends to the marriage... the couple would come awkwardly into the house, where they had been nervously expected for some time, and would be furnished with seats near the fire. It was good manners to pretend that the object of their call was quite unsuspected, and the simple little fraud was kept up until the couple rose to take their leave. It was probably when his hand was on the sneck that the prospective bridegroom would make a sudden dash at the object of his visit, which during the interview had been uppermost in every mind, excepting in that of the gudeman who, when the conversation seemed to be heading straight to the point, had a perfect genius for diverting the talk into another channel. The invitation was not a formal one, and it was good manners to express great surprise at receiving it. Sandie Thomson, who was always an awkward man, instead of giving a definite 'bid', said 'he supposed they would be comin' to this turn-owre.' But that was recognised as a clumsy way of doing the business.⁸⁴

Walter Gregor's description of a betrothal is remarkable for the presence of a particularly terse ritual dialogue:

Two men, called the *sens*, were dispatched from the house of the bridegroom to demand the bride. On making their appearance a volley of fire-arms met them. When they came up to the door of the bride's home they asked:

'Does ---- bide here?'

'Aye, faht de ye wint wee ir?'

'We wint ir for ----,' was the answer.

'But ye winna get ir.'

'But we'll tack ir.'

'Wil ye come in, in taste a moofu o' a dram till we see about it?'⁸⁵

This is a good example of marriage negotiations taking place in the idiom of a battle. Guns are fired, and the threat of abduction is explicit. From this account, it appears that the shots are fired by the girl's side, since the groom's party are those being 'met'. The tradition of the 'courting shot', however, is described in the Scottish National Dictionary as 'a shot fired by a wooer to indicate his arrival to ask formally for the girl's hand' and it may be the signal is fired by his representatives, who have gathered at the young woman's house in

advance. It would, of course, be quite in keeping with the tradition of mock hostility and resistance for the girl's family to fire the shot themselves. According to the same reference source, the term *sens* is derived from the *send*, the individual whose task it was to announce the groom's arrival. However, there may also be a link with the Italian *sensale*, the name given to the marriage broker who specialised in 'the initial negotiations and the preliminary agreement between the two parties'.⁸⁶

The ritual surrounding the 'fetching the bride' in Shetland may be interpreted as a form of ritual dialogue. The scene last century is described by Robert Jamieson:

About six o' clock, the 'aff gang', or bridegroom's breakfast, is put on the table, and his men, who have been invited, assemble; and about the same time the bride's maidens, twelve or fifteen in number, meet at her house. Breakfast over at the bridegroom's (generally a work of three hours), he and his men walk to the bride's house, draw up in line before the door and fire a shot. The door is shut, and no response is made. A second shot is fired; still silence. After a third shot, the door is opened, and the bride, leading all her maidens in single file, walks to the spot where the bridegroom is standing, when every lad must kiss every lass. On re-entering the house, an ancient and peculiar custom is observed. The bride, with her maidens, on coming out of the house, does not walk direct to the spot where the bridegroom is standing, but turns to the left, and goes so as to form a half-circle, following the course of the sun; and on re-entering, the circle is completed. Observing a custom as old as the hills, they walk to the manse. There is a married couple at every wedding, called the 'honest folk', whose duty it is to walk before the bride and bridegroom in procession, and attend to the comforts of the whole company.⁸⁷

Although no words are spoken, this custom clearly resembles 'fetching the bride' rituals outlined above. The closed door signifies resistance; the 'request for entry' at the door is made through gunfire rather than poetry; and the groom's party are ignored until finally the bride and her supporters appear. The ritual has the character of a 'battle of the sexes', where division and resistance to union is presented dramatically, leading to eventual union.

This union is not only between the couple at the centre of the ritual, but all the supporters, who are unmarried. The 'honest folk', the master and mistress of ceremony, who perhaps represent the ideal partnership, also perform the incorporation ritual, the man dispensing wine or brandy and the woman biscuit or cake. A similar picture of mass 'pairing off' is described by Jessie Nicholson and took place before a wedding on Skye in the 1930's:

On the wedding day they would all gather to the bride's home and there were couples there, boys and girls were partnered and they would go arm-in-arm to the church for the marriage and when it was over, they would walk home together again.⁸⁸

c. Eulogy

As in Brittany and Wales, the bards were involved in the celebration of marriages, at least those of the nobility, and in which eulogy played an important part. Martin Martin notes:

The orators, after the Druids were extinct, were brought in to preserve the genealogy of families, and to repeat the same at every succession of a chief, and upon the occasions of marriages and births, they made epithalamiums and panegyrics which the poet or bard pronounced.⁸⁹

In certain areas, the formal asking for the bride is characterised by the exchange of eulogies, rather than indirect discussion of the girl. F.G. Rea recalls the occasion he and his three brothers were invited to a betrothal on South Uist:

I was rather interested, as well as amused, at learning that the Uist people were very careful as to what family they married into. I was told that the Mac X's were sly, the Mac Y's were wild, the A's bad tempered, the Mac Z's were liars, and so on, and no one would marry into a family whose ancestors had ever done a bad turn to theirs. Sandy duly called for us the next evening, and I with my two brothers accompanied him across the braes to the widow's house. With solemn decorum we were motioned to take seats on a bench beside a long table, near the end further away from the fireplace. At this end of the table sat two men, one brown-bearded about fifty years of age, the other, seated beside him, considerably younger, and clean-shaven with the exception of a dark moustache.

Round the fire were gathered the widow and her family, and at the end of the table near them sat a huge man who I knew well, the brother of the widow. I felt rather ill at ease for there seemed to be two camps, Sandy, I, my brothers, and the two silent men at our end of the table forming one group, while the others formed a whispering group near the other end.

Then there came a dead silence which seemed to be a signal, for the bearded man at our end stood up and, in a mixture of English and Gaelic, began a eulogy of the younger man beside him. He spoke of his companion's strength, his skill with a boat, of his knowledge of farming, and his success as a fisherman; he praised the man's parents and forefathers and their achievements. He then intimated that his friend asked for the hand of the youngest daughter in marriage, and wanted to know what would be given along with her in the way of dowry. He then sat down, and the widow's brother stood up and eulogized the girl, her family, her qualities, honest, clean, kind, and so on. Then followed a contest between these two men as to what would be given with the girl, one trying to obtain as much as possible, and the other endeavouring to part with as little as possible. As far as I can remember a bargain was made at last that a stack of corn, a calf and some fowls should be given with the girl.

All this time these two men had held the field, and no one else had spoken a word: the would-be bridegroom had sat with bent head and downcast eyes throughout, while I and my two brothers had sat and listened with very mixed feelings. At this stage the widow's brother left the table and joined the group at the fire, whence there then ensued much emphatic talk but in subdued voices; we sat at the table in silence. Eventually the man from the group at the fire returned to the table and announced that the girl refused the offer of marriage, but that her eldest sister would be willing to accept it. The spokesman at our end bent down and consulted the would-be bridegroom, who looked up for the first time, nodded, and said: 'Ach, aye! It's all the same.' Immediately all came and stood around the table; a bottle and a wine-glass were produced; and, in turn, each drank to the health of the pair who in due course were to be married.⁹⁰

The hosts' 'solemn decorum' is the first indication that this is no ordinary visit, but a clearly-structured ritual event. The spatial separation of the two 'camps' is clearly delineated; the girl's family are gathered round the fire, physically aligning themselves with their representative who occupies the 'superior' end of the table. The table is a 'male' space which becomes the 'duelling-ground', and the visitors are conducted by their hosts to their

'inferior' place at the end of the table furthest away from the hearth. This arrangement is comparable to the separation of the two 'camps' by the threshold, where those inside occupy the 'higher', 'regulated' space, and those outside the 'lower' and 'unregulated'. This may seem rather inhospitable; the rules of hospitality are, however, modified in order to satisfy the demands of the ritual. Indeed, the normal rituals associated with hospitality; unrestricted entry, welcoming words and drink, position by the fire, are *inverted* for the ritual occasion. Silence plays an important part in Rea's description, and it is this which contributes most to his discomfort; in another violation of conventional norms they are guests, but not spoken to. The 'signal' of dead silence which begins the verbal battle is evidently a customary one; the two men engage in solo combat while the others remain silent; and the groom, like Chaucer's *Troilus*, sits in ritual silence with 'bent head and downcast eyes'. The ritual is clearly structured, and as in an earlier example from Brittany, the representatives' verbal skills are centred on two distinct areas. The first is the bardic tradition of eulogy; solemn, creative and self-consciously 'poetic'. Then the spokesmen shift registers to a much more prosaic mode of expression; the cut-and-thrust, hard bargaining of the mercantile world.

Margaret Fay Shaw provides another example from South Uist:

One old custom still kept up was the *rèiteach* or formal betrothal. The young man took an older friend with him to call on the parents of the young woman. After conversation about many things, the friend would begin to extol the young man's character and his qualities for making a good husband for their daughter, while she would make her feelings known by staying in their presence with obvious pleasure or by leaving the room. Whatever the opinion of the parents, unless there was some serious reason for their refusal, the daughter made her own decision. If she stayed, she would seat herself at the table opposite the young man. Her father would say '*Ma tha ise deònach, tha mise ro-dheònach, agus mura bi sin*

mar sin, cha bhi so mar so' (If she is willing, I am very willing, and if that weren't so, this wouldn't be so). The young man would catch the girl's hand, and they would divide a dram between them, drinking from the same glass.⁹¹

It is interesting to again note that there is some preamble, 'conversation about many things', before the eulogy of the young man begins, just as the Breton matchmaker chatted for a while before artfully introducing the subject of his visit. This suggests that another feature of the structural form of the ritual was the deliberate prolongation of the trial; the young man's representative cannot simply arrive and begin his task; he must introduce the purpose of his visit in an artful way, after a seemly period of small-talk. Haste, on either side, would be indecent, perhaps even risky. In the previous example, this prolongation was achieved by a period of separation and of being ignored, finally broken by the signal of absolute silence.

In the former example the girl's representative offers a corresponding eulogy, indicating an acknowledgment of a degree of equality which is the basis for the contestatory situation which results; a verbal battle. In Shaw's account, no eulogy of the girl takes place; indeed, her family have total control over the proceedings. Her consent is heavily stressed, and it is clear that the couple have not met before. It is of interest that both refusal and agreement are expressed non-verbally; to refuse, she removes herself physically from the situation; to accept, she sits opposite (but not next to) the young man. This may be said to illustrate two of the main recurring features of the betrothal ritual; the ritual silence of the girl and her suitor removes them from the verbal interaction, the discussion, and emphasis is placed instead on the expressive gesture - from downcast eyes (in the former example) to simply leaving the room. Such non-verbal communication is no

less potent than words, but it has clear advantages. As with the allegorical exchange, no offence could be taken by the young man - the fiction could be maintained that the girl had simply left the room. Of course, the significance of such a symbolic action in this highly-charged context is understood by all; but what seems important is that *no words were spoken*. Similarly, the Breton custom provided the approaching matchmaker and suitor with a rich selection of upturned, spoiled and inverted objects symbolic of the family's disinterest. As with the examples above, these were potent symbols of the inversion of traditional hospitality. Whilst the suitor's silence ritually removes him from direct confrontation, possible or actual, the girl's silence fulfils another function; the articulation of the taboo against ready acceptance, which, it appears, is as undesirable as open refusal. Even the father's response - clearly formulaic - avoids the direct expression of acceptance. The tone is one of acquiescence - indeed, one commentator states that he 'capitulates' - the father is no longer actively resistant, but neither is he openly welcoming.⁹² Typically, the girl defers to her father, who in turn defers to her; a rather ambiguous and unemphatic expression of assent. Only after the ritual sharing of the same cup can normal traditions of hospitality be resumed. Although the free consent of the girl is central to this account - we are told that the family would have to have a 'serious reason' for their refusal - arranged marriages were known, as one informant from Kyles Paible confirms:

Q: Who were the people who came with the bridegroom to the house?

John MacDonald - Oh, his very close relatives, such as his uncle or cousins or...

Q: Male relatives, were they?

JM: Male relatives, yes, and well, his near closest neighbours too, whether he was related to them or not. Always one of his closest neighbours was taken along.

...

Q: Now, were marriages arranged, arranged without regard to the wishes of the parties concerned, the young people?

JM: Yes, at times it was, in the old days.

Q: Before your time, it would be, would it?

JM: Before my time, yes.

Q: In your father's time.

JM: Yes, definitely in my father's time. Oh yes. Marriages were arranged between the parents of the groom and maybe the parents of the bridegroom. [sic]

Q: What other considerations would they have in mind when arranging these?

JM: Oh they would just... say, now, if there was a... a girl was looking at.. in those days a boy had a good piece of land or anything like that, they were just looking.. that's the only thing they could look for in those days.⁹³

We may note that it was important that a non-kin member be among the suitors supporters; perhaps another method of 'insulating' the two sides from one another, as the Breton matchmakers obviate the necessity of the two sides communicating at all.

Another account of a *rèiteach* involving the exchange of eulogies is described by Annie Sinclair, a native of Barra:

(Nuair a bha) rèiteach dol a bhith ann bha fear na bainnseadh a' dol a dh'iarraidh caraid dha fhèin, agus bheireadh e leis e a dh'ionnsaigh a' rèitich gu taigh na tè a bha e dol ... dol a phòsadh. Agus bhiodh ... bhiodh ann a shin bòrd air a sheatadh 's biadh gu leòr 's dram, agus na càirdean aicese mun cuairt ann. Agus bha esan a toirt leis, an duine bha seo, caraide dha fhèin a bha ri bruidhinn air a shon. mar gum biodh, dol a dhèanamh *speech*. Agus nuair a rachadh iad a thaigh a' rèitich bha ... bha iad a' suidhe sìos aig bòrd, agus bha dram a' dol mun cuairt. Agus nuair a bha ... dram no slàinte a thoirt seachad bha an gille bha seo 'g èirigh suas agus ag ràdh gu tàinig e le charaide às a' bhaile seo eile agus airson cead nam pàrantan fhaotainn airson 's gu toireadh iad seachad nighean, canaidh sinn Tormod, do Thormod a seo. Agus as a dheaghaidh sin thòisich e ri moladh Thormoid ann an dòigh shònraichte, 's bhiodh e 'g innse na deagh bheachdan 's an deagh dhuine, ghille bh'ann, 's gu robh e o dhaoine matha, 's mar sin. Agus bha an uair sin fear an taighe, athair na h-ighinn, ag èirigh suas agus a' toirt taing dhaibh airson cuireadh a chur air airson bruidhinn airson na h-ighinn, 's bhruidhneadh e airson na h-ighinn aige fhèin. Agus bheireadh e seachad cead. Agus chanadh an uair sin am fear a bha 'g

iarraidh na mnatha dha ... dha charaid, chanadh e, "Eiribh a nist 's beiribh air làmhnan air a chèile." Agus dh'èireadh i seo far a robh i agus dh'èireadh esan. Thigeadh e nuas agus bheireadh e air làimh oirre. Bha an dà ... an duine, an gille bha dol a phòsadh, an duine a bh'air an taobh eile 's shuidheadh iad sìos 's thòisicheadh ... nuair a chaidh an drama mu cuairt rachadh a' rèiteach a dhèanamh mar sin.

[When a betrothal was to take place the bridegroom would go to ^a friend of his own and take him along with him for the betrothal to the house of the girl to whom he was to be married. And there a table would be set with plenty of food and drink, with her friends gathered round. And he, this man, took a friend of his along with him to speak for him, to make a speech, as it were. And when they went to the betrothal house they sat down at a table and a dram was passed round. And when they had had a dram or toasted good health, this lad got up and said that he had come from this other village with his friend to get the parents' permission to give away the daughter - let's say Norman - to this Norman. And after that he began to praise Norman in a special way, and he would relate the good opinion people had of him and what a good man... lad he was, and that he came of good people, and so on. Then the man of the house, the girl's father, would get up and thank them for inviting him to speak for the girl, and he would speak on behalf of his own daughter. And he would give permission. And then the man who was seeking a wife for his friend would say, 'Rise now and shake hands'. And she would get where she was and he would get up. He would come down and shake her hand. The two... the man who was going to get married and the man on the other side would sit down, and a dram was passed around and the betrothal was celebrated in that way.]⁹⁴

In this account the ritual hostility and resistance of the girl's family is absent, although some time must pass before the subject can be broached. Again, the girl is represented by her father, the young man by a non-kin representative. Unfortunately, the 'special way' of praising is not described, but we may speculate that this referred to a particular, specially marked form of language, a rhetorical style appropriate, perhaps reserved for the occasion. His eulogy evidently ends with an invitation for the father to respond, who thanks the visitor for the 'invitation'. In addition to delivering the eulogy, the young man's representative performs the role of master-of-ceremonies, co-ordinating the final

movements of the young couple towards union. Once the father's consent is secured he abdicates his 'higher' ritual position; control and ritual responsibility pass to the groom's side. The groom would appear to approach the girl, who may be sitting in a 'separate' space; at the end of the table or nearest the fire. Their union is reinforced by the symbolic union of the two families as all sit down and share the glass of whisky.

Another *rèiteach* on Barra is recalled by Kate MacColl:

Mary MacDonald: Cò nist, an rèiteach mu dheireadh air a robh sibh, a' Cheit?

KM: Rèiteach Màiri Nèill.

MM: Agus cò dh'fhiathaich sibh?

KM: Flòraidh.

MM: Seadh. Bha ise fia ... fiathachadh air a taobh fhèin?

KM: Bha, 's bha esan air a thaobh fhèin. Bha.

MM: Agus co mheud a bhiodh ann?

KM: O bha sguad mòr ann. Bha sguad làn an taighe ann.

MM: Làn an taighe?

KM: Seadh.

MM: Agus cò na bha tighinn còmhla ri fear na bainnse?

KM: *Well*, bha cuideidin ri bhith ann a bheireadh seachad ise.

MM: Seadh.

KM: Agus bha fear aigesan 'g^a h-iarraidh.

MM: 'G a h-iarraidh.

KM: 'Ga h-iarraidh. Agus bha ...

MM: 'S dè bha tachairt an toiseach? Robh iad a' faighinn ... 'N e am biadh a bha ... a bha tachairt ... a bhathar a' dèanamh an toiseach, neo robh ... robh a' rèiteach 'ga dhèanamh mu faigheadh iad am biadh seachad?

KM: Bhathar 'ga h-iarraidh nuair a bha iad aig am biadh, tha mi 'm beachd.

MM: Seadh, seadh.

KM: Nuair a bhiodh ... bha iad 'nan suidhe aig a' bhòrd, 's bha iad an uair sin a bruidhinn. Am fear bha 'ga h-iarraidh-s bha e bruidhinn.

MM: Bhiodh an dram a' dol mun cuairt?

KM: O bha an dram a' dol mun cuairt. Bha, bha. Bha an dram a' dol mun cuairt.

MM: Agus an e a h-athair bu trice bhiodh 'ga toirt seachad?

KM: *Well*, nam biodh a h-athair ann.

MM: Ann.

KM: Mur a biodh, an duine bu dlùithe.

MM: Agus bhiodh cuid athar-san neo cuideigin air a thaobh fhèin aigesan.

KM: Bhiodh.

MM: Nach ann a sin a bhiodh am moladh air an nighinn?

KM: O, m'eudail! 'S ann-san a bha sin.

MM: Agus tha mi creidsinn gum bithte 'ga mholadh-san cuideachd?

KM: O bhiodh, bhiodh. An aon rud.

MM: 'S a robh danns ann as deaghaidh...?

KM: As deaghaidh sin? Chan eil mi am beachd gu robh. Cha robh, oidhche rèitich.

MM: Robh òrain ann?

KM: Orain 's bruidhinn. 'Se.

MM: Agus oidhche na bainnse 's ann a bhiodh an dannsa?

KM: Seadh.

[MM: Now, Kate, which was the last betrothal you attended?

KM: Mairi Neill's betrothal.

MM: And who invited you?

KM: Flora.

MM: Yes. She invited those on her own side?

KM: Yes. And he on his side.

MM: And how many would be there?

KM: Oh, there was a big crowd. A crowd that filled the house.

MM: A full house?

KM: Yes.

MM: And who all came with the bridegroom?

KM: Well, somebody had to be there.

MM: Yes.

KM: And he had someone to ask for her.

MM: To ask for her?

KM: Yes. And...

MM: And what happened first of all? Did they get...was it food that was... that was prepared first of all, or did the betrothal take place before the eating was over?

KM: She was asked for while they were eating, I think.

MM: Yes, yes.

KM: When they were... they were sitting at the table, and then they were talking. The man who was asking for her was talking.

MM: The dram would be passed around?

KM: The dram was passed around. Yes, yes. The dram was passed around.

MM: And it was usually the father who gave her away?

KM: Well, if her father was there.

MM: There.

KM: If not, the nearest relative.

MM: And he would have his father's relatives or someone on his side?

KM: Yes.

MM: What praises would be bestowed on the girl!

KM: Oh! my dear, yes. Indeed, yes.

MM: And I suppose he would be praised also?

KM: Oh! yes, yes, similarly.

MM: And was there a dance after...?

KM: After that? I don't think so. No, not on the betrothal night.

MM: Were there songs?

KM: Songs and talking, yes.

MM: And the dance took place on the night of the wedding?

KM: Yes.⁹⁵

In this account one may detect a further movement away from the solemn and highly charged betrothals of earlier times. Invitations are made, a crowd is gathered, and the meal taken together is the occasion for the exchange of eulogies rather than the symbol of the successful outcome. Apart from the use of third parties to speak for the couple, the lingering ritual significance of the occasion is suggested by the fact that no dancing took place at the *rèiteach*. Perhaps in this communal act of censorship the participants, whether consciously or not, acknowledge the former solemnity of the ritual.

Another example which would appear to suggest a 'one-way' eulogy is from Cape Breton. In this account we also have evidence for the motif of the 'buyers', a ritual preamble, eulogy, and the 'false bride' sequence. The presence of all these ritual elements may indicate one of the most 'complete' examples of the custom.

The bridegroom-to-be and an older friend, someone respected in the community, would come to the home of the girl he hoped to have for a bride. The father would usually know why they had come, but nothing would be said outright. Instead, they would pretend they had come to buy a cow or a horse or a boat - and everything they said had a double meaning. If it was a boat they were claiming they were wanting to buy, they would ask such a question as, Is she broad in the beam? Eventually

they would get down to talking about the real purpose of the visit, and when the older friend had finished speaking well of the bridegroom-to-be and asking for a certain girl's hand, the father would then go through the formality of first offering his other daughters. Sometimes, in fact, the offer was quite serious, as he perhaps wanted to marry off a particular daughter and would actually refuse to give up the girl the young man had come for.

Malcolm Angus Macleod of Birch Plain remembered having seen only one Reiteach. He said the table was prepared for a little feast, and everyone except the young girl herself sat at the table. Her chair was left empty at the table. And the young man who wished to marry her had brought an older man to speak for him, and this older man described the future groom's qualities and love for the girl and asked for her hand. And when all the other arrangements were made, as the final act of agreement, the young girl would come to the table and sit - and strong drink was available, and the feast was served.⁹⁶

It is of interest that the girl is hidden during the eulogy and the discussions which follow, and makes a highly dramatic appearance at their conclusion, to fill the empty chair - another essentially 'dramatic' element. There is an acknowledgment that the dialogue carries a 'double meaning', and that the presentation of women for refusal could carry a serious as well as comic intention. On the level of joking, the bride may be 'broad in the beam', but the clear suggestion is that her father could use the ritual as a way of refusing to allow the match. We have previously described a jilted suitor from the same source.

Writing of the Western Islands in 1782, Rev. John Buchanan described a betrothal in which, as with these examples, only the groom is praised:

Marriages among the gentlemen are attended with no greater pomp than among the better sort through Great Britain; they are commonly attended by their friends, who make merry on this happy occasion. Contracts are only known to a few. But it is not so with the common people. They invite the friends on both sides, to make up the contract of marriage and as all the poor people retain that part of their former importance that entitled them to the honour of gentlemen, *duine uasal*, at least in words, it is supposed that the lady's parents will not make a trifling offer of portion to their intended son-in-law. A pompous promise, if they fail in the performance, adds much to the dignity of the match. Being present at one

of these meetings of friends, I observed that the friends of the young man began with a set speech, by informing the parents of the cause and design of their meeting, which was, to pave the way for an alliance with the family to which the woman belonged; and then launched out at considerable length on the great and good qualities of the young man who aspired at the connection. Meanwhile, they remarked, that the friends of the young gentleman were such as ought not to be received with indifference. It ought, they proceeded, to be esteemed a very happy turn of Providence to cast such a hopeful youth, and good friends to back him, to solicit their friendship. They hoped, therefore, they would make an offer of such a portion to the young woman, as might do honour to themselves, and worthy of so promising a man. The portion formerly was paid in cows, sheep and goats, these being more valuable to them than money; and this old practice is continued in full force. Even if the family should have none, they must name a number of cows, and a handsome number too, otherwise the young man would think his dignity suffered in the eyes of his neighbours. Twenty cows are among the most moderate portions promised, and many of them considerably above that number. If the young couple had reason to be satisfied with each other during the courtship, the affair is generally settled to the satisfaction of the parties, after which they began to make merry... as their cows are but few, they must take, at the time of payment, a kind of representative value of it. Accordingly I was told that a year old cow stood for one; three ewes for another; a spinning wheel for a third; two blankets for a fourth; a small chest for a fifth; and so on until the number agreed upon was completed.⁹⁷

This account is valuable for the light it sheds on the explicitly ritual aspects of the betrothal. The young man's representative delivers a 'set speech', suggesting the existence of an unwritten script which formed the basis of the spokesman's task. This, we will recall, was the form developed in Brittany. The essential elements are revealed as an opening announcement as to why they are assembled; an expression of the desire for union; a lengthy eulogy; a veiled challenge, rather boastful in tone; and an offer of terms. This concluding challenge, almost a threat, seems designed to provoke a reply in kind, although the account provides no clear evidence of this. The 'paving the way' speech may be Buchanan's translation of the name given to the entire ritual; it was noted earlier that the

term *an rèite* is linked to the idea of 'smoothing' and 'clearing' away obstacles. A veiled threat accompanying the proud boast is suggested by the friends of the suitor outlining the kind of reception they expect, defying the girl's family to treat them with indifference, and in a later reference to their 'support', of the young man's suit. The implication is that to scorn the suitor is to scorn the whole group - precisely the situation that indirect forms of expression seem designed to avoid. Whether this is a genuine challenge, or the combatants are merely following tradition, Buchanan's account is a most vivid picture of the two camps 'squaring up' for a verbal battle. Much of the speech suggests exaggeration and hyperbole, which was also noted in the exchange of eulogies between the Breton bards. The pattern of boast, challenge, and counter-challenge seems archaic. The assertion of the equal worth of the two parties is stressed, and this is further underlined by the ritual system of equivalence surrounding the marriage-portion. As with the template outlining the script of the speech, custom dictates that cattle must be given, whether or not the young man is in possession of any. Unless he is a complete stranger, this information will be known to all; but, as with the suspension of normal hospitality, special rules of engagement apply, and those assembled are complicitous in the communal fiction of an ideal suitor, well endowed with wealth and noble qualities. This ritual behaviour, allied with the construction of an elaborate tariff outlining the value of objects in relation to the ideal currency of cattle, is indicative of an archaic relationship between a man and his property. Indeed, cattle were most probably the most common form of currency, as in Ireland. There, the basic unit was the milch cow (*lulgach* or *bó mlicht*) accompanied by her calf. A cow in calf was worth two thirds of this, and a *samaisc*, a three year-old dry

heifer half the value.⁹⁸

Just as the suitor's friends boast of his fine qualities, underscoring his masculinity and greatness with their own pride and strength, his potency, success and ability is also evident in the number of cows which make up his marriage portion. Whether he can make good this promise is not important; in the ritual world, the young man is the embodiment of ideal perfection; a match impossible to refuse, a worthy successor to her father in the care and protection of the girl. In the same way, every eligible woman is a laughable assemblage of imperfections except the chosen one, the perfect image of the eligible partner. As we have noted, a belief exists that even the young man's representative must be physically perfect; nothing can be left to chance.

III. The refusal sequence

Several accounts of the *rèiteach* give descriptions of what we have termed the 'refusal sequence' following a ritual dialogue; others are associated with a diminution or total lack of the verbal elements of allegorical exchange or eulogy. The 'false brides' are either refused allegorically, as 'unsuitable animals', for example, or directly, by making reference to the personal qualities of the participant.

Flora MacCuish from Berneray gives two separate accounts of the meeting she terms *còrdadh*, equivalent to the *rèiteach beag*. The first has a short exchange preceding the bringing out of the women for refusal:

FM: An còrdadh a' cheud rud a bh'ann, 's bha iad a' coinneachadh dhan taigh an oidhche sin. Cha bhiodh ann ach dìreach corra dhuine, ò dìreach caraidean dhe na daoine air gach taobh. Bhiodh ... tha ... dithis no trìuir aicese 's bhiodh dithis no trìuir aig an fhireannach. Agus bha am fireannach

a' dol a staigh, agus bhathar a' dèanamh biadh dha 's gnothaichean. Agus nuair a bha e nis a' suidhe aig a' bhòrd ... tha ... dh'innseadh ... chanadh am fear a bha 'g iarraidh a' bhoireannaich, "Well, chan eil mise 'dol a dh'ithe greim no 'dol a dh'òl a seo a-nochd gus an toir ... toir a mach an toiseach brath na h-Inid as an Ròimh gu bi fhiosam carson a thàna mi."

"Carson a thàna tu?" chanadh am fear air a robh e 'dol g'a h-iarraidh. "Carson a thàna tu?"

"Thàna mi dh'iarraidh ... tha ... searbhanta no bean a leithid seo a dh'fhear." Agus nuair a thàinig e ... Chaidh i nuair sin ... Bhiodh na boireannaich air am fàgail a muigh.

Ian Paterson: Seadh dìreach.

FM: 'S dheadhadh fireannach a mach an uair sin agus bheireadh e staigh tè dhe na boireannaich. Agus: "Dè mu dheaghain na tè sa, ma's ann ag iarraidh boireannach a tha thu a leithid seo a dhuine? Dè mu dheaghain na tè seo?"

"O cha ghabh mi i sin idir," ars esan. "Dè dhèanadh," ars esan, "na pliutan beaga tha sin," ars esan. "Dè dhèanadh na pliutan beaga sin," ars esan, "dol a bhleoghan dà mhart no trì dhomhsa ann am bàthaich, no idir dol a chartadh bàthcha, no idir," ars esan, "dol gu cliabhachd feamaid? Cha dèan i càil dhomh," ars esan. "Dhèanadh i rud-eigin," ars esan, "nam biodh i aig Peigi Iain," ars esan, "gu spionadh chearc 's rudan dhen t-seòrsa sin, aig do mhàthair."

IP: Agus nise, 'se ... 'se rèiteach àraid a bha seo.

FM: O chan e. 'Se còrdadh a bha seo.

IP: An còrdadh.

FM: An còrdadh a bh'ann.

IP: 'Se. Se, 'se fear aig a robh sib' fhèin a tha seo, an e?

FM: 'Se. 'Se.

...

IP: Seadh dìreach. Agus cò bhliadhna mum biodh sin? A's na 1920's an ann, no ...?

FM: 'S ann gu dearbh, tha mi 'creidsinn, no 1922 no 23.

IP: 22 no 23. Seadh. Ach bha sibh a 'ràdh bha iad a nise a' toir a staigh na clann-nighinn.

FM: Bha.

IP: Tè as deaghaidh tè.

FM: 'S bha... Thug e staigh a Nurse an uair ud. Agus thug e nuair sin a staigh ... Chaidh i sin a thilleadh air falbh. Thug e nuair sin a staigh Curstaidh 'ic Ruairidh. Agus ò bha i sin glè mhath 's glè cholach air son bean do dh'fhear sam bith, ach "tha i car aotrom."

"Och ma tha," arsa Ruairidh, "ma tha i car aotrom leat," ars esan, "chan fhaca tusa dad riamh as fhasa na dèanamh trom."

IP: O dìreach.

FM: Agus ò cha ghabhadh e i an deaghaidh sin. Dh'fhalbh Ruairidh a

mach an uair sin agus thug e staigh Raonaid Dhòmhnail. Agus: "Dè mu dheaghain na tè sa?"

'S ò bha i sin comharraichte math. Bha colas oirre gu dèanadh i sniomh 's gu dèanadh i clòithtean, 's bha i stòlda 's bha i stèidhte, 's cha robh mathas nach robh oirre. 'S cha robh ach i sin a chur 'na suidhe aig a' bhòrd còmh ri Seonaidh Iain 'ic Alasdair Bhàin. Chaidh an uair sin am botul thoir a mach, 's fear na ... am fear-comhailtiche dh'èirich e, Dòmhnall Iain Chaluim, dh'èirich e nuair sin 'toir drama dhan a chuile duine shìos. Bha mi-fhèin 's

...

IP: Bha sibhse 'còrdadh còmh riutha.

FM: Bha. Mi-fhèin 's Dòmhnall Iain Chaluim.

IP: Agus 'se nise, Ruairidh Alasdair a bha 'g iarraidh...

FM: Ruairidh Alasdair, 'se bha 'g iarraidh a' bhoireannaich air Ruairidh Dhòmhnail Mhòir, ged a 'se a bràthar a bh'ann.

IP: Bha fhios aige cò an tè bha ...

FM: Bha fhios aige cò an tè bha e 'g iarraidh. Ach bha na h-igheanan air an cur am falach gus an toireadh iad air tè mu seach aca.

[Flora MacCuish - The agreement was the first thing, and they gathered in the house that night, only a few of them, just friends from each side. She would have two or three and the man would have two or three. And the man went in and food and such like were got ready for him. And when they sat down at the table the man who was asking for the girl would say, 'Well I'm not going to eat a bite or have a drink until first of all you bring news of Shrovetide from Rome, so that I know why I have come.'

'Why you have come?' the man for whom he was asking the girl would say.

'I came to ask for.. a servant or a wife for such and a man.'

And when he came... the women were left outside.

Ian Paterson: Quite so.

FM: And a man would go out then and bring in one of the women. And 'what about this one, if it's asking for a wife for such and such a man you are? What about this one?'

'Oh, I won't take that one at all,' says he. 'What use would these small hands be for milking two or three cows in a byre, or for mucking a byre, or at all for gathering seaweed in a creel? She won't do anything [be of any use] for me,' says he, 'She would do something if Peigi Iain had her,' said he, 'for plucking hens and things of that kind.'

IP: Was this a particular betrothal?

FM: No! This was an agreement.

IP: An agreement.

FM: It was the agreement.

IP: It was one you were at yourself, was it?

FM: Yes, yes.

...
IP: Yes, and which year would that be? 1920?

FM: Yes indeed, I believe it was 1922 or 23.

IP: 22 or 23. Yes. And you were saying that they were bringing in the girls.

FM: Yes.

IP: One by one.

FM: Yes. He brought in the nurse that time. And then he brought in ---, she was turned down. Then he brought in Corstaidh nic Ruairidh, and oh! she was quite good and quite suitable for any man, but... 'She is light'. 'Och then,' says Ruairidh, 'if she is too light for you,' says he, 'you never saw anything easier than to make her heavy.'

IP: Just so.

FM: And oh! he would not have her after that. Ruairidh went out then and he brought in Raonaid Dhomhnaill. 'What about this one?' Oh! that one was particularly good. She looked as if she could spin and make tweeds, and she was sedate and steady, and there was no good quality hat she didn't possess. And there was nothing but to put her sitting at the table along with Seonaidh Iain Alasdair Bhàin. Then the bottle was brought out and the best man, Domhnall Iain Chalain then got up, got up to give a dram to everybody.

IP: You were at the agreement along with them?

FM: Yes, myself and Domhnall Iain Chalain.

IP: Now, it was Ruairidh Alasdair who was asking for...

FM: Ruairidh Alasdair was asking Ruairidh Dhomhnaill Mhoir for the girl, though he was her brother.

IP: He knew the one...

FM: He knew the one he was asking for, but the girls were hidden until they were brought out one by one.⁹⁹

The presentation of the women for refusal is preceded by a ritual dialogue in which both parties claim not to know why they are assembled, a feature common to many examples of betrothal rituals described above. The reference to 'news of Shrovetide from Rome' (needed to calculate the date of Easter) forms part of a traditional saying. As Ronald Black observes, 'Rome's authority has long been symbolised in the saying ... 'knowledge of Shrovetide comes from Rome... as a proverb, *fios na h-Inid às an Ròimh* is also used to describe any peremptory command.'¹⁰⁰

The refusal to eat and drink is another inversion of the norms of hospitality, and this is parried by the host's enquiry as to why they are there. The exchange again takes place at a table, and although the food is prepared, it would appear that the feast itself is reserved for the conclusion of the ritual. The asking for the girl is made in direct terms, and one can assume the reference to their seeking a 'servant' is meant humorously.

The women have been waiting 'offstage' in another room, which emphasises the essentially dramatic nature of this stage of the ritual, as well as indicating that the young man's representative had no opportunity to prepare his responses, since he would not know which women were to be brought in. Like the Welsh bards who endeavour to guess the identity of those inside, the 'performer' may have a good idea of which women are likely to be in the room; but the notion of a 'trial' is clear - he must think on his feet. This task would, of course, increase in difficulty if the representative is confronted with women he does not know well, or at all. The first woman mentioned is rejected because of a physical feature; her small hands make her an inferior worker. A joke follows; there is a woman in the community who could teach her about hard work. The nurse follows, and then another woman, who receives praise but is also rejected, presumably because her 'lightness' makes her less able for physical work. There is a pun on the word *trom* - 'heavy', which also means 'pregnant'; a good example of wordplay by the girl's representative. The bride-to-be is praised for both her potential as a worker and for her character, the emphasis being on the ideal feminine attributes of industry and mildness. The ritual is concluded in the usual way; she is brought to the table, placed symbolically beside the groom, and the dram is offered around by the 'master-of-ceremonies'.

Flora MacCuish described the bringing in of the women on another occasion:

Bha an còrdadh an toiseach ann.. Readh duine agus 's dòcha an duine 'na ònrachd, readh e dhan taigh a dh'iarraidh a' bhoirionnaich. Agus bhiodh iad còrdte gu leòr air son gum biodh rèiteach ann. Bhiodh a nis an ceann - chan eil fhiosam dè an ùine. An e mìos no fichead latha - thigeadh rèiteach, 's bhiodh an uair sin, triùir na cheathrar air gach taobh a' tighinn a staigh. Agus bhiodh nigheanan a' tighinn a staigh. 'S bha na h-ighneanan bha seo a' tighinn a staigh, agus bhiodh fear ag iarraidh a' bhoirionnaich dhan an duine seo. 'S bheireadh iad a staigh an tè seo 's ò cha robh cron nach robh oirre sin. Cha dèan i sin. Cha tog i buntàta 's cha bhleoghain i crodh, 's cha dèan i siod 's cha dèan i seo, 's cha robh i brèagha gu leòr, no rud air choir-eigin ceàrr. A chuile tè bha rud ceàrr oirre, gos a tigeadh an tè bha iad ag iarraidh. Agus cha robh fhios gu dè na gothan èibhinn bha iad a' toir air na h-ighneanan. 'S bha dìreach oidhche mhòr aca. Agus thigeadh a nis an tè bha iad ... O bha i seo math. Cha robh math nach robh air an tè bha e dol a phòsadh. Nuair a bha an rèiteach seachad bha nuair sin partaidh aca le deoch is òl gu biodh e uaireanan 's a' mhadainn. Agus bhiodh a nis, ... readh an oidhche sin, bhiodh a' fiathachadh cuin a bhiodh a' bhanais ann, 's cò bha ri'm fiathachadh 's an fheadhainn bh'air am fiathachadh robh am baile air fad 'ga fhaighinn, no cò na daoine bhiodh ann.

[First of all there was the agreement. The man, and perhaps the man by himself, would go to the house to ask for the woman. And they would have agreed up to the point where there would be a betrothal. Then, at the end of - I don't know how much time - was it a month or twenty days? - the betrothal would take place and three or four from each side would come in. And the girls would come in, and a man would be asking this man for a woman. And they would bring in this one, and oh! no fault was to be found in that one. That one will not... will not lift potatoes and will not milk a cow, and will not do that, and she will not do this, and she was not beautiful enough, or there was something wrong. Every one had something wrong with her, until the one they were asking for came in. And who knows what witty taunts they said to the girls. And they had a great night. And then the one they wanted would come. Oh! this one was good. The one he was going to marry had every good quality. When the betrothal had taken place they had a party, with drink and drinking until all hours in the morning. And then, that night the invitations, when the wedding would be and who was to be invited, and was the whole village to be invited, or what people would be there.]¹⁰¹

In this account the informant clarifies the distinction between the various stages of the ritual sequence. First, there is a private meeting between the suitor and the father of the

girl in which he formally asks for the girl's hand in marriage - the *còrdadh*. It is of interest that this could be accomplished by the young man alone. The second meeting, at which the verbal exchange and refusal sequence take place, is evidently more public, and clearly amounts to a public, 're-asking' custom of the kind noted elsewhere. The reasons for rejection in this example are centred on the woman's refusal to work. This can be understood as an affirmation of marriage as joint labour; the outlining of the responsibilities and conduct expected of the girl is, as we have noted, a recurring feature of the ritual. We may note that the 'witty taunts' are delivered by more than one individual on the groom's side; the criticising of the women was evidently a 'free-for-all'. It is also of note that the informant makes no mention of dancing, although the drink is flowing freely.

Another account of a *rèiteach* in Berneray is found in the nineteenth century MacLagan manuscripts. The informant is Ann MacLeod, 'domestic servant':

The intending Bridegroom appoints a Friday night for visiting the parents or guardians of his intended, with the view of obtaining their consent, and making the arrangements for the marriage. This meeting is called *An rèite*. When the Fridy [sic] in question comes, the young man appears, accompanied by an unmarried male relative. They are received in an apartment of the house, while in another part, his intended, together with six other women conceal themselves. When the visitors are seated, the father or guardian of the to be bride asks 'What is the meaning of this?' To which the friend of the bridegroom replies 'We are come for a wife.' The young women are then introduced, one after another, with the question 'Will this one do?' The answer is always 'No', until the right one comes who is always purposely left till the last, and when she appears, the friend comes forward and says 'This one will do', and taking her by the hand presents her to her intended, who places her beside himself on his right hand, until refreshments are partaken by the whole company, after which they amuse themselves according to their inclinations until the following morning.¹⁰²

In this account the role of ritual dialogue is clearly shown. The visitors are shown in and

seated, whereupon the father opens the proceedings in the now familiar way of asking the reason for their visit. The response is formulaic and extremely direct, as are the terse exchanges during the presentation and refusal of the women. These are remarkably blunt; no reason is given by the suitor's representative for their rejection, no mention of their physical or other characteristics. There is neither poetry, wit nor humour. One is left with the impression that the verbal element of the ritual has diminished, while the dramatic content has remained well-developed; the informant is quite clear in specifying six women. The artful refusal of six 'false brides' would indeed have been a considerable challenge and test of verbal skill, and it is interesting that the number should have remained constant while the verbal component is reduced, on one side, to monosyllables.

Several accounts from Harris show that the refusal of the women could also be effected allegorically. Morag MacLeod interviewed two sisters from Bun Amhuinn Eadarra:

Peggy Morrison: ...*Well*, nuair a phòs té dha mo pheathraichean bha ceithir tursan, bha 'n rèiteach beag 's an rèiteach mór 's a' bhanais a staigh againn fhèin 's a' bhanais a's an taigh aige-san. Bha na ceithir...

Morag MacLeod: Dé neise bha tachairt aig an rèiteach bheag?

PM: O cha robh càil ach mar gum biodh seorsa do *pharty* dìreach. Cha bhiodh cruinn ach dìreach beagan dhaoine, air an rèiteach bheag. Agus a neise an rèiteach mór - bhiodh iad a' cur air leth an oidhche - an latha bha am pòsadh go bhith ann. Agus mar bu trice 's ann seachduinn o'n a bhiodh e - mar gum bhiodh air Diardaoin, agus seachduinn o'n ath Dhi-Màirt bhiodh a' bhanais ann... Agus an rèiteach mór, bhiodh e cheart cho... a cheart urad do dhaoine air, 's do cheol 's do bhiadh 's dha'n chuile seorsa 's a bhiodh air aig na bainnsean.

MM: Bheil cuimhne agaibh air rudan a bhiodh iad a' deanamh aig an rèiteach mhór?

Christina Shaw: Bhiodh dithis na triùir air an cur air leth, dha na gillean a bha staigh - bhitheadh 's na bodaich - a' falbh air feadh na cloinn-nighean agus iad a' breith air te thall 's a bhos 's 'ga slaodadh suas a cheann a' bhùird, 's uaireannan 'ga riasladh. Agus bhiodh sinne dol falach leis an nàire

man toireadh iad suas sinn go fear na bainnseadh. Agus nochdadh iad a's an dorus le te a siod 's a seo, 's dh' fhoighneachdadh iad, 'An e seo i?'

'O chan i. O chan i, tha i sen ro dhuilich a geamhrachadh.'

Agus bha té cho grànda 's bha té cho reamhar, 's bha té ro chaol 's bha chuile cail ceàrr... coire air a chuile té. 'S bha iad a' toir suas nan cailleachan cuideachd. Cha robh e go dibhear có choinnicheadh riutha, 's bha tòrr dha na h-ingheanan a' teiche 's a' dol a mach dha na bàthchannan mam beirist orra. Ach ma dheireadh a neise, bhathas a' faighinn greim air an té cheart, 's bhathas a' dol suas leatha sen a cheann a' bhùird 's dha cur 'na suidhe ri taobh an fhir. 'S chanadh a' fear a bha 'g iarraidh na bean òige, 'O seo i, seo i. Gabhaidh sinn i sen.' Sen mar a bha iad. 'Ni i sen an gnothuich.'

...

MM: Agus a neise, nuair a bhiodh iad ag iarraidh bean-na-bainnse, robh cail sonruicht aca dha ràdha, na robh iad a'...

CS: *Well*, bha. A 'fear a bhiodh ag iarraidh bean-na-bainnse, bha fear-na-bainnse a' toir leis fear, 's fear a bha math air briodhann an còmhnuidh - duine éibhinn mar gun canadh tu, 'se sen ma bha e ri fhaighinn, a bha iad a' taghadh, airson gum biodh tòrr aige ri ràdha 's gum biodh spòrs ann. Chanadh e, 'Thaine sinne nochd ann a sheo,' na, can, rud colach ris a seo, 'ach a faiceamaid a robh boirionnach ri lorg dha'n chulaidh-thruais a tha ann a seo.' 'Cò a tha sibh a' smaoinachadh - A bheil gion ann a sheo air a robh sibh a' smaoinachadh?' 'S dh'fhalbhadh iad an uairsin, dithis na triùir dha na gillean. Bhitheadh 's na bodaich... a muigh... air feadh nam boirionnach, 's bheireadh iad air te a siod 's a seo, 's dòcha gun toireadh iad suas dusan mas beireadh iad air an té cheart.

[Peggy Morrison:]... Well, when one of my sisters married, there were four occasions, the small rèiteach, the big rèiteach, the wedding in our own house and the wedding in his house. There were the four...

MM: Now, what happened at the small rèiteach?

PM: Oh, there was nothing but a sort of party. Only a few people would be there for the small rèiteach. And the big rèiteach now - they used to decide on the night - the day on which the marriage was to be. And usually it was a week from when it would be - say it was on a Thursday, a week the following Tuesday would be the wedding... And the big rèiteach, it was just as - just as many people at it, and as much music and food and everything as there was at weddings.

MM: Do you remember any of the things they did at the big rèiteach?

Christina Shaw: Two or three were selected, of the boys who were in - yes, and old men - to go amongst the girls, grabbing one here and one there and dragging her along to the top of the table, and sometimes manhandling her. And we used to hide, from shyness, in case we were taken up to the groom. And they would appear in the doorway with this

one and that one, asking, 'Is this her?'

'Oh no. No. That one's too difficult to winter.' And one was so ugly, one so fat, one was too thin, and everything was wrong - each one had a fault. And they took old women up too. It didn't matter who they came across, and a lot of girls hid and went out to the byres in case they were caught. But at last, now, the right one was got hold of, and she would be taken up to the top of the table and seated next to the man. And the man who was asking for the young woman would say, 'Oh, here she is, here she is. We'll accept that one.' That's how they were. 'That one will do.'

...

MM: And now, when they were looking for the bride did they have anything special to say, or were they...

CS: Well, yes. The man who was asking for the bride, the groom took a man with him, and always one who was a good speaker. It was a witty man, as you might say, that they chose, that is if he was available, so that he would have lots to say and there would be some fun. He would say, 'We came here tonight,' or, say, something like this, 'to see if there was a woman to be found for this pitiful object here.' 'Who do you think - is there anyone here that you had in mind?' And they would go off then, two or three of the lads, yes, and old men too, outside - amongst the women, and they would grab one here and one there, they might take a dozen up before they would catch the right one.¹⁰³

In this very vivid account allegorical and direct refusal appear to be mixed, and it may be that the informant has more than one *rèiteach* in mind. 'Too difficult to winter' is a zoological term, whilst the other criticisms could apply to the women themselves. The large number of women involved and the stress placed on the indiscriminate nature of their selection are indicative of a custom which is far less formal and ceremonial in character than the Breton examples previously analysed. In the latter custom, the choice of the 'false brides' seemed symbolic; a young girl, a widow and an old woman represent different stages of the 'life cycle'. The example from Harris is more suggestive of the twin aims of prolongation and entertainment. The women, whom we note are reluctant to participate, are presented for refusal at the doorway to the room in which the groom's party is

gathered, or physically 'dragged' to the groom's end of the table farthest away from the door, to be turned down at close quarters. Part of the amusement, (although the informant's choice of language indicates an ambiguous reaction, bordering on the negative) centres on this dramatic 'delivery' of the women. Theirs is a forced journey to and from the territory of 'one's own' to that of the 'alien'; further dramatising the choice made by the young bride as she is delivered and left to take her place by the side of the groom, whose representative has publicly accepted her. It is of interest that the *rèiteach mòr* is described as an event equal in popularity with the official wedding, and it may be that the informant intended to say that the event was just as *important*, before correcting herself. As with other accounts, the verbal skill of the representative is clearly acknowledged, and a good example of his rhetorical ability is shown by the inverted eulogy with which he opens his performance on behalf of his '*chulaidh-thruais*', 'pitiful object'. This mocking opening gambit could, of course, only be appropriate in the context of a 'sort of party' where all the details of the marriage had been settled beforehand. Notwithstanding the reluctance of the women, it would appear from this account that any tension between play and seriousness has been lost; the atmosphere is convivial and informal, and a communal delight in the drama and wordplay is the surviving component of the archaic ceremonial sequence.

The following account is taken from the memoirs of F.J. MacDonald, a native of Harris. The *rèiteach* he describes took place around 1915, his father playing the role of master of ceremonies.

Here now was Peter... in full flight with a wedding song which was, in today's terms, 'explicit' in the extreme, bringing half-hearted protests from

the women and roars of approbation from the men. It went on for verse after verse, and it was beginning to pall on me because its innuendo (if that isn't too delicate a word) was far above my head... Song followed song. Somebody played the bagpipe, and somebody played the trumpet as the Jew's Harp was called. Now and again Donald John Murray was prevailed on to lay down his drink and pick up his melodeon and the company erupted into dancing which involved frequent lurchings into the table...

'Silence!'... the voice was my father's... he assumed to himself a strange and pompous voice which was untypically forceful... 'My friends', he said, 'the time has now come!'... my father, by dint of reason and persuasion and hectoring managed to divide the motley throng into two groups... Mary's old father... stood erect and patrician looking. My father, having got the company ordered to his satisfaction, launched into a measured, flowery, speech. On behalf of himself and everybody within and without the parish he thanked the old couple for their hospitality, and for 'the use of their roof', as he put it, for one of the best parties he had ever attended. Now, he wondered if they would extend their kindness and good-will still further and receive a stranger who had arrived unexpectedly at the door.

Mary's father bowed graciously and said that his home had ever been open to the stranger and asked that this one be brought forward. A man who was, indeed, a stranger to me stepped forward and bowed gravely to Mary's parents... if my father had been flowery, this fellow was worse. It turned out that he was a sailor home on leave and though he had been at parties in every corner of the globe this was, by far, the best he had ever enjoyed and he was sorry to be the one to introduce a note of solemnity into the proceedings.

'I am here', he went on, 'representing my good friend James, at whose shoulder I will be standing if and when the day comes that he gets married. James himself cannot be here tonight because he is practising the great art of looking after children, and it is to be hoped that he is learning well in case the day comes when he was to tuck in his own...' He went on to explain that he had been sent, because of his great experience of boats and the sea, to buy a boat for James! It had to be a good boat - a boat that had not been ill-treated in any way; a boat that could stand a tall mast; a boat that would last well and would not be expensive to maintain... It was a long speech, made longer by the gales of laughter that greeted every apparently innocent sentence, and he described a boat that was out of this world.

'And finally', concluded the stranger in his smooth Gaelic, 'it must be known to you that my friend James is a man of great experience with boats (howls of laughter from the company) and a man who knows a good boat when he sees one and will not be taken in by paint and varnish! I am asking therefore, if you can sell me a boat that is sound from prow to

stern (more laughter), one that will stand up to whatever weather comes her way, and will not ever drag her anchor'. The stranger gravely acknowledged the applause and stepped aside. Mary's father stroked his beard and held a serious whispered conversation with his wife. He then moved slowly forward and took my Great Aunt Rachel by the hand. She was creased with laughter and I noticed that she had put her teeth in for the party. 'Here', said the old man, 'is a boat which has weathered many storms, but she's good for a few years yet. As far as we know she's only ever had one mast (complete uproar) and only her present owner has hoisted her sails.' (Pealing laughter again.) 'This boat has been well cared for. She may look weather-beaten but her beam is sound!'

It was some time before the stranger could reply, but when he did it went something like this: 'A fine boat I have no doubt but not suitable for the shallow waters around these parts. Top heavy too unless my eyes deceive me. But, worst of all, old boats have characteristics of their own and they are not always obedient to a new hand on the rudder. No. If you can't do better than that I must look elsewhere'.

My Great Aunt Rachel squeezed herself back into her armchair with her bosom heaving and tears of laughter streaming down her face... Mary's father proceeded to bring forward, one after the other, four or five women from the neighbourhood... and one after the other the stranger turned them down - sometimes with ribald comment where the candidate was a buxom adolescent; with great graciousness where she was a modest matron. At last he seemed to lose patience and made as if to go, but before he could do so Mary's father took his daughter by the wrist and pulled her, protesting coyly, into the ring. 'Very well,' he said, 'this is my last offer to you. Here is a boat I have always meant to keep for myself. But if your friend James will promise to look after her I might consider letting her go'.

The stranger beamed. He took Mary and spun her round and round, pretending to be running his hands over her but not touching her at all. 'My friend,' he said at last, 'this is the very boat for James, and, if I mistake not, perfect for the kind of cargo he has in mind for her...'

I was not to realize till much later... that I had been privileged to witness an old Highland wedding custom that I was never to see again.¹⁰⁴

This account is remarkable for the vivid impression it creates of the ritual occasion. The master of ceremonies separates the audience into two groups, creating a 'ring' into which the women are brought. This image immediately calls to mind the ring into which animals are led for inspection by potential buyers at the cattle-market; in this case it is the girl's

father who ushers them in, in other accounts there is an escort to perform this task. The strikingly physical final inspection of the bride-to-be by the groom's representative reinforces the impression of a 'market-place'. It is also the space in which the speeches are performed. Those of the master of ceremonies and the 'stranger' are described as 'flowery' and 'long', and both are accompanied by a mock seriousness. The MC's voice is 'strange', 'pompous' and 'forceful', and this theatrical feature of the performance is mirrored by the representative's apology for his 'solemnity', his pausing for laughter to subside and his 'grave' acknowledgement of applause at the conclusion of his speech. Aside from the inflated rhetoric, creation of a performance space and provision for the audience, there are other dramatic elements; the motif of the stranger seeking hospitality is employed as a pretext for entry, and we may therefore consider the representative to be performing 'in character'; the father bows 'graciously', the stranger 'gravely' before their speeches begin; the 'buyer' twice makes as though to leave - another 'market-place' image; and the bringing forward of the women into the ring and the final inspection of the bride-to-be are highly theatrical in nature. The representative's opening speech is clearly a eulogy, and it is of interest that the motif of the 'boatsman' is employed at this point and not only during the rejection of the 'boats' themselves. He is the future best-man, and works a boastful reference to his own 'experience' into his speech. An air of pronounced sexual charge pervades the proceedings and the speeches and exchanges are replete with sexual innuendo. This finds physical expression in the concluding 'inspection' of the bride. Before the opening speeches there is a bawdy wedding song, 'explicit in the extreme'. The risqué nature of the content is, of course, made more amusing by the 'grave' and 'pompous'

method of delivery. Reference is made, however, to a more 'gracious' tone adopted when the sensitivity of the woman to be refused warrants such treatment. Recurring features of the ritual other than the 'trader' motif may be noted; refusal of a woman is on the grounds of 'impossible transplantation' - she is not suitable for the water around the groom's location; the girl 'protests coyly' as she is brought to the representative, the groom himself being absent; the father reluctantly agrees to part with his favourite, on condition she is cared for (this recalls the proviso 'welcome to sail in calm waters' noted elsewhere); and her fertility is stressed - she will be able to bear the groom's 'cargo'.

The audience enjoy the occasion hugely; and their pleasure is mainly derived from the verbal skill involved in sustaining this prolonged allegorical exchange. The description of its ribald nature, preceded by spirited dancing, is in stark contrast to the sober ceremonial exchanges noted in Brittany and elsewhere in Scotland, and is rather at variance with the account by another Harris informant which stressed the lack of 'crudity' and the 'dignity' of the occasion.¹⁰⁵ Both informants are in agreement, however, that the *rèiteach* died out after the First World War.

That the function of the *rèiteach mòr* is a form of more public 'replaying' of the *rèiteach beag* is further suggested by the first lines of the following account from Scalpay:

Nuair a gheibheadh e i, dh'fheumadh iad a cuir a nuas ach a faicist i. 'S dòch gur e chailleach bu mhotha bhiodh am broinn an taighe dhe'adh suas, bheireadh iad suas. Bhiodh iad toir suas té ma seach go nochdadh bean na bainnseadh. Nuair a dhe'adh bean na bainnseadh suas bha i 'na suidhe ri thaobh. Bha 'a fear comhailteach a' lionadh glainn uisge-bheatha 's bha e dha thoir a dh'fhear na biannse 's chanadh e ris: 'Bheir a neis an còrr - dàrna leth - dha 'n duine 's fheàrr leat.' Bheireadh e dhì-se - dh'òladh iad a' ghlainne le chèile. Bha nuairsin an rèiteach a' dol air adhart.

[When they had agreed that he could have her, they had to bring her in so

that people could see her. It might be the biggest old woman in the house who would come in... they'd bring in. They'd bring them in one by one till the bride-to-be appeared. When the bride-to-be came in she sat down by his side. The best man would fill a glass with whisky and give it to the groom and he'd say to him: 'Now give what's left - half of it - to the one you like best'. He'd give it to her - they'd drink the glass together. Then the (rest of the) *rèiteach* went ahead.¹⁰⁶

This account suggests that the formal consent of the girl and father, accomplished at the 'small betrothal', and the more open 'big betrothal' have been combined. Once the 'private' element is concluded, a further stage is necessary so that 'people can see' the bride-to-be. It would appear that the groom is placed at the end of the table ready to receive the 'false brides', and once she has taken her place, all witness the solemn incorporation ritual of sharing of the cup. The 'rest' of the *rèiteach* may refer to the feast and the discussion of practical arrangements with regard to the official wedding. It is of interest that the informant emphasises that even the old *cailleachs* are brought to the young man as potential brides, as if to express the indiscriminate nature of their selection. The informant acknowledges the distinctive logic of the ritual; *any* woman can be presented, even the oldest, who could not possibly be considered a rival partner.

The following account is also from Harris. The informant, Murdo Ewan MacDonald, describes the betrothals he attended in the 1920s and how young people met one another:

[The] closely-knit community met often at various times... at spring, autumn, the fishing, the ceilidh; they met each other very often at the ceilidh... they took communion very seriously - it only happened twice a year... it was a festivity in a way... one of the signs was if you saw a young man or a young woman walking back from communion together - that was a sign... you were always watching for that. I remember my mother and my father saying 'They're going to get married - they always walk back from the communion' that sort of thing. It was done most

discreetly...

The informant goes on to describe who was invited to the *rèiteach beag* and *mòr*, and what took place:

The *rèiteach beag* was very intimate; the nieces, the nephews, the uncles, the aunts and maybe one first cousin or so, and the next door neighbour... a little meal, and the father of the bride would get up and thank them for coming... They would come to ask my father 'we'd like you to be the master of ceremonies at the *rèiteach mòr*...' [there were invited] close relatives... not so close relatives, second cousins or third cousins, close friends who were not necessarily related, not at all related - they may have been on the same fishing boat - and the neighbours, whether they were related or not... The whole community contributed to these feasts - it didn't fall on the family... It was at the *rèiteach mòr* that they had this kind of acted drama; it was quite funny and some people specialised in it. They appointed a 'master of ceremonies' and they invited some women in and the M.C. 'interviewed'... 'No, No, you're not suitable... you can't weave, you're not good at it and you're not houseproud enough; och, there was all kinds of ridiculous reasons, and it's obvious from the way you dress that you're not dress-conscious and it was very funny... then the bride came; she was perfect, she was beautiful, she was well-dressed, she was houseproud, she could weave and do this and that... [it was] very good-natured and funny, everybody took it good-naturedly and the people who were dismissed took it even better.

The informant also recalled one of his father's methods of refusing the women; 'you're not going to be accepted, you're overweight and he just can't afford to feed you... she left the place roaring and laughing'. During the proceedings, there were 'some standing, some sitting; the older people sitting and we children stood around the wall and looked on'. The master of ceremonies was

at a table where he could command the whole, he stood behind the table and harangued... one by one - there was an escort bringing them in - one by one dismissed for various reasons. [The groom-to-be] was watching and laughing... the M.C. was in sole charge and he dismissed those who didn't qualify in very charming, non-rude and humorous terms; it took an immense amount of skill, and everyone enjoyed it - it was very dramatic... my father was very good at that, he worked at it beforehand and he knew

the people who were going to be escorted in... There was a *pattern* about the thing you see, the *rèiteach beag*, the *rèiteach mòr*, the drama - that comic thing - which was very amusing... it was never crude, it was humorous; whenever the woman was dismissed people were laughing, for it was so absurd the reason for dismissal, and she was laughing loudest... 'I remember when you were young, you were very good looking; but you're not young now' and he left the... he didn't say 'you're not good looking' - that kind of thing -it was very well done. They looked forward to that dismissal, and then of course we knew it would happen - the bride would come in dressed up 'Oh great! no wonder he asked you to marry him!'... This was the stage that they were accepted; the *banais* was going to proceed; the penultimate stage; there was that kind of formality, though not expressed - but it was there... They let their hair down at wedding times; that's another part of the institution. They can be solemn, religious and pious. I suppose that goes back to the medieval catholic feast, where you were given, they were allowed certain... you were allowed to let your hair down for a short time. Now, the nearest equivalent in the Protestant Hebrides is the *rèiteach beag*, *rèiteach mòr* and the *banais*... people behaved in a joyful manner, but [with] dignity; marriage was taken very seriously; [the bridegroom] remained as modest as possible.¹⁰⁷

This account confirms the clear distinction between the stages of the ceremonial sequence.

The *rèiteach mor* is attended by those who attended the earlier *rèiteach beag*, with the addition of those still considered as belonging to the 'inner circle' of the family, whether kin or not. This leads to the wedding, the *banais*, where the whole community, perhaps the whole island is invited, personally, by the bride and groom. The sequence can be visualised as a series of concentric circles; at the centre the ritual couple and their intimates exchange consent and come to agreement on sensitive matters in a secluded, non-public space. Following this, these events are 'replayed' for the benefit of a larger number of kin and non-kin with an interest or stake in the marriage. This takes place in a space large enough to accommodate a crowd and allow the dramatisation of the groom's selection of a partner from among their number. The very act of refusing cousins, friends and neighbours acknowledges and articulates their perceived involvement in the process. This is also

accomplished by leaving certain things undecided until this stage, such as who is to be invited to the church, allowing a wider range of opinions to be heard. The third stage involves travelling through the community dispensing invitations to the 'outer circle'. The informant describes how in Harris the bride and bridegroom invited the guests from door to door, and 'every house had someone represented'. Then the couple make their promises again; this time in full public view and in the eyes of God, outdoors and under the heavens. The informant describes the return of the couple from the church: 'they would prefer to walk... on the way back everybody waved towels, shouted at them and wished them well, and some people got up to the hills above and fired volleys; my father fired the shots and Donal John piped'. The elaborate provision for, and articulation of community involvement makes one certain that it was not the couple who 'preferred to walk' but custom which dictated that they did so.

This account confirms the participant's perception of the ritual as 'a kind of acted drama' which everyone looked forward to. There is a sizeable audience, and the verbally skilled main performer, described as a 'specialist' has prepared his witty retorts in advance, confirming our earlier suspicions that as he is of the community, he would have a good idea of which women were likely to appear. It may be that the women were selected some time in advance of the occasion, giving the 'master of ceremonies' time to prepare his 'script'. He has an assistant, the individual charged with escorting the women in. One suspects that some element of cueing and signalling would be necessary in order that the 'false brides' are delivered at the correct time. A large number and wide variety of women would obviously provide an opportunity for virtuosic verbal display, which is appreciated

by all, and the informant acknowledges the level of skill involved. The refusals are, however, non-allegorical; rejection centres solely on physical characteristics. These are delivered without causing offence; the informant places great stress on the 'dignity' of the proceedings and the good cheer which prevailed, especially among those rejected. The example of verbal skill singled out for praise by the informant is of interest; the bard sets up the joke in such a way that he disclaims responsibility for the reading 'you are ugly', which is the logical conclusion of the joke: 'I remember when you were young and good looking. You're not young now...' As we may expect, the bride is accepted and praised as the ideal partner, lauded as 'perfect' in her appearance, house-making skills and ability to work. The tendency to indirect expression is suggested by the description of courtship, and the communal enthusiasm for fairly direct insult sanctioned by custom is tentatively compared to the licence allowed by the Catholic church on saint's feast days. The final significance of the ritual is made plain by the informant; 'they were accepted; the *banais* was going to proceed'. This suggests another function of the ritual; with each movement away from the centre of the inner circle, and with each progression of the ceremonial sequence, the marriage becomes more certain to take place. As community involvement increases, momentum is gained and the breakdown of the betrothal progressively less likely. The second and third stages could be seen as mounting 'insurance' against the fickle humanity at the centre of this community drama, ritually 'acting out' the restructuring of social relations. As with many of the examples outlined above, the couple's new status brings restrictions, and the period between betrothal and marriage is closely policed in many cultures. This may be the prosaic aspect of the superstitious belief that the groom-

to-be was in mortal danger between the *rèiteach* and his marriage.

The scrupulous invitation of the whole community is again suggested by the following account from Donald Morrison of Mull.

Bha rèiteach aig cuid, aig cuid. Bha rèiteach, oidhche rèiteach ann.. Tha cuimhne agam gu math air, bhith air falbh aig rèiteach, 's mi 'nam bhalach. Bha iad sin oidhche aca, lathaichean mun tigeadh a' bhanais, agus ò tì is dram 's gabhail oran aca ann a sin a's an taigh sin. Bha. Agus nuair a gheibheadh tu cuireadh gu na banais, ann an cois cò thu 's e an aon ruith a bha chuile duine faotainn, on bhalach gus an duine bha cheann liath. Bha e faighinn an aon ruith. Bha e aig a' phòsadh. Ma bha am ministear gam pòsadh, agus nuair a bha iad aig bòrd na suipeireach mar a bhiodh iad ris bha e sin cuideachd. Bha iad cruinn còmhla a sin. Cha robh nì dealachadh air an darna h-aon seach an t-aon eile. Bha sin ann.

[Some people had a *rèiteach*. Yes, some had a betrothal. There was a betrothal evening, I well remember it, going to a betrothal as a boy... And when you got an invitation to the marriage, it did not matter who you were, everyone got the same invitation, from the boy to the one who was grey-haired. They all got the same invitation. They were at the marriage. If the minister was going to marry them, when they arranged the supper as was their wont, he was there too. They were all there together. There were no distinctions made between them. There was that.]¹⁰⁸

The couple's incorporation into the community continued with rituals during and after the marriage, and at their 'kirking'. Marion MacLeod from Lewis recalls:

The day of the actual wedding a piper came along and the piper preceded the procession to church. The bride on the way to the church was led by a groom's man. On the way back home the bride and groom led the procession, after the piper. The people were taken in to the wedding table in relays after which they would go out to the barn where the dancing went on till two in the morning... the bride and groom had to sit it out at the head of the table while the relay after relay of guests sat at the table and toasted their health. Now the toasts were individual, so it took quite a while... it would have been a terrible disgrace if someone had gone away and not taken of the meal that had been prepared. The following night they had what was called the *banais-tighe*. Now that meant another celebration in the bridegroom's house for the elderly and for the people who just couldn't sit it out the night before.

She also describes the kirking, the couple's first appearance in church, which was also carefully structured:

On the following Sabbath they had what was known as the Kirking. This meant going to church; the bridegroom and his bride, the best-man and the best-maid... the best-man went into church followed by the bride and the groom and the best-maid and they sat in that order in the pew. The best-man led the way into church. He stood at the end of the pew while the bride and groom and best-maid went into the pew and he took his seat at the end... that was the Kirking.¹⁰⁹

In the following account from Scalpay, it appears the groom had to chase or find his bride, and catch hold of her hand before the ritual could be concluded. Billy Kay notes that the groom had to 'catch his bride from all the other young women in the room, who were often pushed in his direction. At first the bride is hidden, along with her bridesmaid, until brought up to the room where the groom is sitting with 'the old men'. These seem to dominate the proceedings, perhaps the 'ritual experts' who are responsible for the eventual union of the pair. The allegorical device employed would appear to be that of the 'couples'.

The Friday before the wedding, all the old men and women gathered together in the bride's home. And the bride and the bridesmaid was in the bedroom, hiding in the bedroom, and all the old men were cracking away and in about half an hour they would say 'Oh well we'd better see about this *rèiteach* in the house'. And one of the old men would get up and go down to the bedroom and get a hold of the bride-to-be and the bridesmaid would follow her. And the bridegroom was sitting along with the old men and one of the other old men would get up and say 'Well, I think this bride will be well-fixed to this one'. And they would try and get hold of one another's hand, you know, the bride and bridegroom. And one of the old men would say 'that's fine, they're nailed together now'. They would carry on and sing songs and have tea until about two in the morning.¹¹⁰

IV. Harris *rèiteach*, 1970 - extended dialogue

The only recording of the procedure at a *rèiteach* is of a wedding in 1970 on Harris, and takes the form of an improvised allegorical dialogue and 'false bride' sequence. This recording was passed to Morag MacLeod of the School of Scottish Studies and her transcription and translation forms part of her essay 'Rèiteach'. The marriage is between Bella Morrison and Donald MacDermid. In her introduction to the text, the author notes:

Bella's family all have curly hair and her father and only brother are nicknamed Curly. Bella is the youngest of Kenneth Morrison's seven daughters and all the others had already married. On the bride's side the speakers were Norman MacLeod, one of her brothers-in-law and a bard, and John Morrison, a neighbour who has always been a popular entertainer at weddings. John is a confirmed bachelor. On the groom's side the speakers are two neighbours, one a schoolteacher, Neil Campbell, the other a shopkeeper who, alas, died recently, Calum MacSween... the introduction of English words and of topical allusions adds to the causes for merriment. The prospective bridegroom sits at the top of the table, with the four protagonists facing each other across the table, two on his left and two on his right. Friends and relatives who have been invited are crowded round this group as closely as possible, so as to hear what is said. There may be as many as seventy to eighty people crammed into the room.¹¹¹

There are occasional contributions from those nearby, including Finlay MacDermid, the father of the groom, and Kenneth Morrison, father of the bride, but three of the four main protagonists are non-kin neighbours, whilst the other is a non-kin relative. It is to be noted that the one of the bride's representatives is described as a 'bard' and the other a popular choice at weddings - corresponding to the sought-after 'master of ceremonies' described by an earlier informant from Harris. The text is here reprinted in full.¹¹²

Noraidh: *Well*, tha'n camp air a roinn co-dhiù.

Seonaidh: O tha, tha.

Niall: Dé ma dheidhinn an duine bho chd tha 'na ònrachd shuas ann a shiod?

Calum: Tha tòrr a dhith air a' bhòrd co-dhiù. Dh'fheumadh rud-eigin a dheanamh ma dheidhinn.

Noraidh: O, *well*, chan eil - tha mi smaoineach gu bheil gu leòr biadh air 's dha'n a chuile seòrsa, co-dhiù cho fad 's a chì sinne. 'S rinn sinne na b'urrainn dhuinn, cho fad 's a chì sinn co-dhiù. Tha sinn toilichte gun d'thainig sibh a choimhead oirnn, 's chan eil...

.....

Noraidh: Feumaidh sinn fhaighinn a mach dorst [dé rud] tha à-san ag iarraidh cuideachd, man iarr sinne, fhios agad.

Seonaidh: Feumaidh gu bheil iad ag iarraidh rud-eigin.

Noraidh: Tha, rud-eigin 'nam beachd, a Sheonaidh, gun teagamh, a mheit.

Seonaidh: Chan eil othaisgean aige a Tharmoid, a mheit. Chreic e na h-othaisgean.

Noraidh: *Well*, chan eil mi ràdha nach eil othaisgean a' dol fhathast. Chan eil mòran, fhios agad.

Calum: Droch Earrach.

Noraidh: Droch Earrach ann a Chalum. Bha, bha, bha. Chan ann a' tòiseachadh air stoc a tha sibh na...?

Calum: Chan eil càil a dh'fhios.

Niall: O...feumaidh sinn tòiseachadh air stoc.

Calum: Tha prìs mhath air beathaichean. 'S dòcha gu faigheamaid...

Noraidh: Tha agus thainig tòrr air an dearbh thuras sen ann a sheo ma thràth 's tha iad air sinne sgrios, a bhalaich. Chan eil mòran air fhàgail againne, fhios agad.

Seonaidh: A, chan eil cus air fhàgail againne co-dhiù.

Noraidh: Chan eil, Iain. Tha iad ag iarraidh dealachadh ris a' chù.

Seonaidh: Tha iad ag iarraidh Judy, a mheit. Bidh e gu math *tough* nuair a dhealaicheas mi ris.

Noraidh: Faodaidh tu bhith cròthadh a' chait leis treiseag a bhalaich.

Niall: Nach fhaod e rud a chur 'na àite?

Seonaidh: O, cha ghabh càil cur 'na àite.

Noraidh: O chan eil e farasd a charaide.

Calum: Chan eil na cearcan pailt ann an dràsda.

Seonaidh: Tha 'ad sen, thod, *out of the question*.

Noraidh: Tod! Nach coma càil à-san. Chan eil annta ach adhbhar àmhghair co-dhiù.

Seonaidh: 'Se. 'Se.

Noraidh: O 'se. *Well*, tha beagan othaisgean a' dol.

Seonaidh: O tha, sen a' dol.

Niall: A bheil an *curl* anns a' chlàimh aca?

Noraidh: Tha. Tha beagan do *churl* annta *all right*...

Niall: O. ma tha...

Noraidh: ...fhathast co-dhiù ga b'e fhad 's a mhaireas e, Nèill. Chan eil

fhios agam-sa. Cha bhi 'n saoghal fada a' toir a' *churl* as rud idir.

Niall: Tha 'ad ro aosda ma dh'fhalbhas an *curl* asda.

Noraidh: Tha. Bheil sibh am beachd stoc a...?

Niall: O tha sinn a' lorg stoc.

Noraidh: Mà, 'se briod àraid a bhios a dhith oirbh.

Niall: Tha 'm Baile a' feumachdainn stoc co-dhiù.

Noraidh: Tha e feumachdainn stoc gun teagamh a Nèill, ach... Chan eil fhiosam air thalamh dorst a chuir a seo sibh dha iarraidh co-dhiù.

Niall: O *well*, fearann mór a seo a bhalaich, 's tha fhios gu bheil...

Noraidh: A - tha fearann *all right*.

Calum: Pios math a bhos a seo.

Tarmod Fhionnlaigh: Feumaidh gun d'thainig stoc math as ma thràth.

Noraidh: Nach e sen a tha agam dhut a Tharmoid.

Niall: Bha 'ad a' cinneachadh math, an fheadhainn a bha seo.

Noraidh: Bha. Gad a bha Coinneach bochd, bha e gu math...

.....

Coinneach: ...nuair a chaidh e chon a' *churladh*...

Noraidh: O, bha mi dha *watchadh*. Bha mi dha *watchadh*, a charaide. Tha mi dha *watchadh*. Tha e *fly*. O 's ioma rud anns a bheil *curl*, a mheit.

Seonaidh: O gu dearbha 's iomadh. 'S chì thu gu leòr dhiu sen an diugh, a mheit. Abair thusa gu faic thu *curls* an diugh, a mheit.

Noraidh: Sheadh. Chan eil fhios agad an ann firionn na boirionn a tha 'ad an diugh. Bha uair a dhearbhadh an *curl* 'ad.

Niall: *Well*, thoiribh dhuinne te bhoirionn a nochd co-dhiù. Cha dean an còrr an gnothuich.

Seonaidh: O *well*, a mheit, chan eil e farasda firionn na boirionn a dheanamh a mach an diugh a Nèill.

Noraidh: Chan eil sinne a dol a thòiseachadh a' rùsgadh airson sen idir. O *naw, naw, naw, naw!*

Seonaidh: Feumaidh tu barrachd air rùsgadh a dheanamh. Feumaidh tu dhol na's fhaide na sen.

-?:- Tha e colach gu feum sibh marc a chur orra.

Calum: Feumaidh sibh *tag* a chur orra.

Noraidh: Feumaidh gu bheil sibh am beachd a réisd gur ann an tù-sa a tha stoc ceart?

Niall: O 's ann an tù-sa a tha 'ad a' cinneachadh co-dhiù.

Calum: 'S ann an tù-sa a tha 'ad *all right*.

Noraidh: O mà, a charaid ort...

Niall: Tha Seonaidh Iain Mhoir a' ràdh ruim gun do bhàsaich na bha aig a' Bhaile.

Noraidh: *Well*, bheireamaide dhuibh othaisg ach tha Coinneach bochd mar a tha e, fhios agad. Chaidh tòrr thoir bhuaithe.

Seonaidh: Chan eil cus othaisgean aig Coinneach an diugh.

Noraidh: Chan eil. Tha aon chaora sheasg aige... Ach tha *doubt* agam gun toir e seachad i.

-?: Te mhór bhàn gheal?

Noraidh: Chan e, Iain, o chan e, ach caora mhór sheasg. Tha othaisg aige ach cha toir mi dhut idir i Nèill. *Well*, bheir mi dhut i ach - hà - feumaidh mi rud innse ma déidhinn. Ghabh sùil oirre. Ghabh sùil oirre ach 's dòcha gun *cure*-adh tu sen.

Calum: Gabhaidh. Uisge far airgid oirre.

Niall: An t-sùil a ghabh oirre, nuair a gheibh e i?

Noraidh: O, *well*, chan eil fhoisam. Tha i, fhios agad, go falbhan uamhasach an dràsda. Chan eil i mar gum biodh i, fhios agad, stòlta.

Seonaidh: Chan eil i *settled*.

Noraidh: Chan eil i *settled* a Sheonaidh.

Seonaidh: Chan eil. O, chan eil. O *well*, tha chuile duine sen an diugh. Chan eil iad *settled* ann. Bidh 'ad a' falbhan.

Noraidh: Ach 's dòcha gun toireadh... 's dòcha gu faigheadh e caora bhuaithe.

Seonaidh: 'S dòcha. Ai.

Noraidh: Tha i seasg.

Seonaidh: O ma tha chan fhaigh e i.

Noraidh: *Well*, tha i seasg an dràsda ach cha bhi i seasg an còmhnuidh. Tha 'ad againn fhèin seasg uaireannan.

Seonaidh: 'S math gu bheil, a bhalaich.

Noraidh: Ach chan eil sinn a' dol dha toir seachad airson i bhith seasg an còmhnuidh.

Seonaidh is Calum: *Not likely*, a mheit, *not likely*.

Noraidh: 'S dòcha. Chan eil fhios agamsa...

Seonaidh: Chan dean gamhnach an gnothuich co-dhiù.

Noraidh: O chan dèan. Tha gamhnaichean againn gun teagamh. Tha e *depend*-adh air dé 'n innis air a bheil i dol.

Seonaidh: O tha. Hìo, feumaidh sinn sen a *watch*-adh.

Noraidh: Feumaidh sinn a *watch*-adh *all right*.

Calum: O, cha bhi dìth innis oirre. Ma gheibh sinne greim oirre cha bhi dìth innis oirre.

Niall: Cha bhi dìth innis oirre.

Calum: Cha bhi.

Seonaidh: 'Se greim fhaighinn oirre, mheit.

Noraidh: Tha e glé fharasda, a Sheonaidh, a bhith còir anns a' phailteas, ach 'se bhith còir anns a' ghoinne. Sen bad a bheil...

Seonaidh: Sen agad am *point*, a mheit.

Noraidh: Bha uair a bha sinne pailt a bhos a seo a mheit. Bha.

Niall: *Well*, bha uair a bha Coinneach ann a sheo pailt e fhéin ach tha e air fàs gu math gann a neis.

Noraidh: Tha. Tha. Chan eil e farasda dha *replacements* dhèanamh, fhios

agad.

Seonaidh: Bha e latha dha shaoghal 's cha bhiodh e fada *replace*-adh, a mheit.

Noraidh: Cha mhór a tha as a dhéidh.

Niall: Nach cuir thu fhéin 's Fionnlagh rud math a staigh ris, ma tha?

Noraidh: O, tha e gu math na's... Tha - gu math sàmhach.

Fionnlagh: Chan eil càil agam-sa.

Noraidh: Chan eil càil agad-sa! Tha rud agad-sa *all right*.

.....

Noraidh: Chan eil còir agad innse uair sam bith dé na tha agad do stoc. Sen rud tighinn ris-san.

Fionnlagh: 'Se. 'Se. Cha do dh'innis mi sen riamh.

Noraidh: 'Se. Tha esan fhathast a' creidsinn anns na seann rudan od a bhalaich.

Seonaidh: O chan eil mi fhéin ag innse. Chan eil agam ach Judy. Chan eil.

Niall: O chan e Judy tha sinn a' feitheamh idir.

Calum: Tha Judy a' fàs aosda... Beathaichean òga a bhalaich.

Noraidh: Ai. Chan eil fhios agamsa gu dearbha dorst a nì mi.

Niall: *Well*, bha triùir bhràithrean, triùir bhaidseileirean, a' fuireach còmhla ann an taigh, agus am piuthar còmh riutha gun phòsadh 's i suas ann an lathaichean. Thainig am piuthar ma dheireadh, rinn i cleas -----, rinn i *last gasp*, 's phòs i. Agus chaidh an triùir fhàgail leotha fhéin. An ceann beagan ùine chaidh an taigh rù-rà, fhios agad. Bha 'ad an crochadh air am piuthair, 'se bha dha'n cumail dòigheil. Bha Eirdsi tha seo, 'se bha deanamh a chuile cail a bha ri dhèanamh, mar a' glanadh na bàthchadh 's a chuile h-obair bu shuaraiche na chéile. 'S thuirt an dithis eile ma dheireadh, "*Well*," ars esan, "chan eil fhios, ach feumaidh sinn pòsadh. Feumaidh Eirdsi pòsadh. Feumaidh Eirdsi bean fhaighinn."

"O Dia," ars Eirdsi, " 'se chuile h-obair as suaraiche na chéile bheir sibh dhòmh-sa."

Noraidh: A *well*, bha sen math! Cha robh e smaoinichadh mòran dha'n phòsadh.

Rodaidh Alasdair: Cha do bhuail moran dha'n ghaol a' fear od.

Seonaidh: Dearbha cha do bhuail.

Noraidh: Bha fhios aige nach robh e dol a dh'fhaighinn moran toileachadh as.

Niall: O chan e, ach cha robh fhios aige dé bha roimhe ann... Sen mar tha Seonaidh, 's Judy.

Calum: *Well*, tha'n fheadhainn tha feitheamh ag iarraidh cùmhnant, tighinn go cùmhnant, 's tha 'n t-am agaibh tighinn go cùmhnant.

Seonaidh: 'N toir sinn dhuibh an té a tha againn?

Noraidh: *Well*, bu thoil leinn an toiseach feadhainn a - tha feadhainn eile againn, fhios agad. Chan eil mi radha, 's dòcha gum b'iad a b'fheàrr leibh.

Bheil sibh cinnteach gu faithnich thu i?

Niall: Faithnichidh. O thì, tha deagh aithne againn.

Calum: O tha *tag* againn oirre.

Niall: Tha. 'N *tag* againn oirre.

Noraidh: *Tag* agaibh oirre?

Seonaidh: Tha *crowd* anns an fhaing, a mheit.

Noraidh: Tha deagh ghiobairean ann a shen. Seall Bunty ann a shen. Haoi! haoi!

-?: Seall Nathan. Bunty!

Calum: Seall Nathan e fhéin. Tha e glé mhath. Nathan 'se 's fheàrr. Cha reid mi nach e giobair a tha ann fhéin.

Boirionnach: Tha Nathan math orra.

.....

Noraidh: Iain! Seall i seo. Seo a neise 's tha i seasg cuideachd. Tha i seasg, cha fad 's is aithne dhomh.

Calum: O, tha i glé mhath. Tha i glé mhath gu dearbh.

Noraidh: Tha 's geamhraichidh i sgoinneil. Siubhad a neis.

Calum: Chan eil mi creidsinn gu bheil an *tag* air a' chluais aice idir.

Noraidh: Bheil an *curl* innte?

Boirionnach: Chan eil.

Seonaidh: Nam biodh i treis air a' *rye-grass*...

Noraidh: O, feumaidh sinn foighneachd do Rodaidh a réisd.

Niall: Tha i ro chàirdeach dha'n bheathach a tha sinn a'...

Noraidh: O 'n e sen a tha ann?

Niall: 'Se. Cha dean i càil dhuinn.

Noraidh: Siubhad ma-tha. Feuchaibh - feuch ceann shuas na fainge. Bidh 'n còmhnuidh feadhainn na's fheàrr a' teiche.

.....

Bunty: Seo agad a neise dhut. Seo agad a neis a mheit. *Cheviot*!

-?: *Cheviot*. Abair *Cheviot* a siod agad a mheit. A beanntan na Mòr(bh)airn a thainig i. 'S ann.

Calum: Do dh'fheuch sibh a' chluas cheàrr aice, bheil an *tag* oirre? Mar a bheil an tag oirre...

.....

Niall: Chan fhuiricheadh i againne idir. Tha i ro fhada air an fheur.

Noraidh: Chan fhuirich. Tha i ro fhada an tù-sa. Ma tha cù math agaibh a chumadh sios i? Sheonaidh, bheir dhaibh esan, dé 'n t-ainm a tha air a rithist?

Seonaidh: Judy.

Noraidh: Judy. *Well*, an ath te mar a còrd i ruibh, feumaidh sibh...

-?: Bha i as cionn na Glais-sgeir ro fhada.

.....

Noraidh: Shen agad a neis. Chan eil rian gun diùlt thu 'n té od a laochain. Chan eil rian gun diùlt thu 'n té od.

Calum: Cha dean i càil an tù-sa.

Noraidh: Chan eil na's fheàrr an tù-sa neis.

Calum: Cha dean i càil ach air Galldachd... coimheach an diugh. 'S chan eil do leisgeul ri ghabhail. Tha i ro fhliuch an tù-sa. *No, you're no use this side.* Tha i ro fhliuch a seo air a son, a mheit.

Noraidh: O, chan eil go'n tig a...

Niall: O, tha i air a reic ma thràth.

Noraidh: A?

Niall: Chaidh a reic ma thràth.

Noraidh: À, *mistake* a rinn sibh. À, feuch nach cuir sibh as-onair as mo leth co-dhiù.

Niall: Tha marc oirre siod, a bhalaich. Tha marc oirre siod.

Noraidh: Chan eil mi radha nach eil, a bhalaich. Feuch beathach eile. *Well*, chan eil fhios agamsa. Tha beathach na dhà fhathast ri fhaighinn nan toireadh tu nuas iad.

.....

Niall: *Well*, ma's e beathach òg. Feuch a faigh sibh beathach òg.

Nathan: Tha e tighinn, a mheit.

Noraidh: Sen thu. Tha iad garbh duilich, a Sheonaidh, an riarachadh. Seo agad a neis i. Seo a neis.

Calum: Seo a neis a bhalaich.

Noraidh: Seo a neise. *Straight* as na h-eileanan móra, *Right from the Shiantas*.

Calum: An Eilean an Taighe bha i?

Noraidh: Eilean an Taighe. 'Sann. À, tha cholas oirre, charaide.

Niall: Cha dean i càil an Cnoc na h-Uamhadh an déidh sen?

Noraidh: Nach dèan, a Nèill? Feuch a rèisd a faigh sibh tè a nì chùis an Cnoc na h-Uamhadh. Chan eil fhios agamsa dé seòrsa tha sibh ag iarraidh.

.....

Niall: Ma fhuair i 'm bainne 'n Eilean Màiri, tha i *done*.

Rodaidh: Cha dean i càil air an fheur tha seo.

Noraidh: Ai, ai! A *well*, chan eil móran air fhàgail anns an fhaing tuilleadh, a Nèill.

Nathan: Té mhath fhathast ann a mheit.

Noraidh: Bheil?

Nathan: Tha, té mhath fhathast ann.

-?: Nathan, Nathan.

Noraidh: Feuch a faigh thu greim oirre. O, nach fhaodadh sealbh gur e

seo i.

Calum: Tha 'n *tag* oirre sen. Tha... Caora an Earraich *all right*.
Geamhraichidh i seo.

.....

Noraidh: Tha mi'n dòchas gum bi briod math agaibh a neise.

English translation by Morag MacLeod

NM: Well, the camp is divided at any rate.

JM: Oh yes, yes.

NC: What about the poor soul who's by himself up there?

CM: The table is lacking much, anyway. Something would need to be done about it.

NM: Oh well, there's no - I think there's plenty food on it, and of every sort, at least as far as we can see. And we did as much as we could, as far as we can see at least. We're glad you've come to see us, and there's no...[All this said in a very polite, mock-defensive tone]

.....

NM: We shall have to find out what they want, too, before we ask, you know.

JM: They must be wanting something.

NM: They have something in mind, Johnny, certainly, mate.

JM: He has no hoggs, Norman, mate. He's sold the hoggs.

NM: Well, I wouldn't say but that there may be hoggs going still. Not many, you know.

CM: A bad Spring.

NM: A bad Spring, Calum. Yes it was, yes, yes. You're not starting a new stock, are you, or...?

CM: You never know.

NC: Oh.... we'll have to get a stock started.

CM: There's a good price for beasts. We might find...

NM: Yes, and a lot have come here on that very business already, and they've ruined us, boy. We don't have much left, you know.

JM: Ah, we don't have much left anyway.

NM: No, John. They want (you) to part with the dog.

JM: They want Judy, mate. It'll be pretty awful when I part with him.

NM: You could herd the cat with him for a while, boy.

NC: Can he not replace him?

JM: Oh, nothing can replace him.

NM: Oh, it's not easy, friend.

CM: Hens are not plentiful just now.

JM: They are - och - out of the question.

NM: Huh! Who cares where they are. They're nothing but a lot of bother, anyway.

JM: Yes, yes.

NM: Oh yes. Well, there are a few hoggs around.

JM: Oh yes. They're around.

NC: Is there a curl in their wool?

NM: Yes. They have a bit of curl all right.

NC: Oh well.

NM: ...So far at least, however long it will last. I don't know. Life will soon take the curl out of a thing.

NC: They're too old when the curl goes out of them.

NM: Yes. Do you mean to stock...?

NC: Oh we're looking for stock.

NM: You'll be after a special breed then.

NC: The Village needs new blood anyway.

NM: It needs new blood right enough, Neil, but... I don't know on earth what made you come this way for it anyway.

NC: Oh well, this is a big croft, boy, and surely there's...

NM: Ah, the croft's all right.

CM: A good piece (of land) over here.

Norman Morrison: Some good stock must have come from there already.

NM: Isn't that what I'm on about, Norman.

NC: They grew well, the ones that were here.

NM: Yes. Although poor Kenneth, he was fairly...

.....

Kenneth Morrison: ...when he took the curling...

NM: Oh, I was watching him. I was watching him, my friend. I'm watching him. He's fly. Oh, there's many a thing that has a curl, mate.

JM: Oh, indeed yes. And you can see plenty of them nowadays, mate. You can certainly see curls nowadays, mate.

NM: Yes. You don't know whether they're male or female nowadays. Time was when the curl would distinguish them.

NC: Well, give us a female tonight at any rate. Nothing else will do.

JM: Oh well, it's not easy to tell male from female nowadays, Neil.

NM: We're not going to start shearing for that. Oh no, no, no, no!

JM: You'll have to do more than shearing. You'll have to go further than that.

-?-: Seemingly, you have to mark them.

CM: You have to put a tag on them.

NM: You must be thinking then that the good stock is at this end.

NC: Oh, it's on this side that they grow, anyway.

CM: Oh, this is where they are, right enough.

NM: Oh well, my friend...

NC: John MacDonald tells me that all the ones at the Village died.

NM: Well, we would give you a hogg, but poor Kenneth is the way he is, you know. A lot has been taken from him.

JM: Kenneth does not have many hogs nowadays.

NM: No. He has one dry ewe... but I doubt if he'll give her away.

-?: A big fair white one?

NM: No, John, oh no, but a big dry ewe. He has a hogg, but I certainly won't give that to you, Neil. Well, I'll give it to you but - ha - I'll have to tell you something about her. An evil eye got at her. An evil eye got at her, but you might be able to cure that.

CM: Yes. Silvered water for her.

NC: The eye that fell on her, when he gets her?

NM: Oh, well, I don't know. She is, you know, terrible for wandering just now. She's not what you might call, sedate, you know.

JM: She's not settled.

NM: She's not settled, Johnny.

JM: No. Oh, no.. Oh well, everyone's that way nowadays. They're not settled. They wander.

NM: But he might give... he might get a sheep from him.

JM: Yes. Aye.

NM: It's dry.

JM: Oh, if so, he won't get it.

NM: Well, it's dry at present but it won't always be dry. Our own ones can go dry sometimes.

JM: It's just as well, boy.

NM: But we're not going to give it away for it to go dry for good.

JM & CM: Not likely, mate. Not likely.

NM: Perhaps. I don't know...

JM: A farrow cow won't do anyway.

NM: Oh no. We have got farrow cows right enough. It depends on what meadow it's going to.

JM: Yes. Goodness, we'll have to watch that.

NM: We'll have to watch it all right.

CM: Oh there'll be no lack of grazing for it. If we can get hold of it, the meadow will be fine for it.

NC: There'll be no lack of grazing for it.

CM: No.

JM: It's finding one, mate.

NM: It's quite easy, John, to be generous in plenty, but to be generous in hard times! That's where the...

JM: That the point, mate.

NM: Time was when we had plenty over here, mate. Yes.

NC: Well, there was a time when Kenneth himself had plenty but he's become pretty hard up now.

NM: Yes, yes. It's not easy for him to make replacements, you know.

JM: There was a time in his life when he wouldn't take long to make replacements, mate.

NM: There aren't many to follow him.

NC: Can't you and Finlay give him some good reinforcements then?

NM: Oh, he's much more... Yes - pretty quiet.

Finlay: I've nothing.

NM: You've nothing! You've got something all right.

.....

NM: You should never tell how much stock you have. That's what's bothering him.

Finlay: Yes, yes. I never told that.

NM: Yes. He still believes in those old things, boy.

JM: Oh, I don't tell. I've just got Judy. Yes.

NC: Oh, it's not Judy we're waiting for.

CM: Judy's getting old... Young beasts, boy.

NM: Aye. I don't know what to do, indeed.

NC: Well, there were three brothers, three bachelors, living together in a house, and their sister lived with them, unmarried, and she was getting on a bit. At last their sister did like ----- [woman's name] and got married at the last gasp. And the three were left by themselves. After a time the house got very messy, you know. They'd depended on their sister. She was the one who had kept them in order. But this Archie, it was he who did everything that was to be done such as cleaning out the byre and all the dirtiest work. And the other two said at last, 'Well,' said he, 'there's nothing for it but that we'll have to get married. Archie will have to marry. Archie will have to get a wife.'

'Oh God,' said Archie, 'it's all the dirtiest work you give me.'

NM: Ah, well, that was good! He didn't think much of marriage.

Roddy Cunningham: That fellow wasn't much smitten by love.

JM: Indeed no.

NM: He knew that he wasn't going to get much joy of it.

NC: On no, but he didn't know what the future held for him... That's how it is with Johnny, and Judy.

CM: Well, those who are waiting want you to come to an agreement, and it's time you came to an agreement.

JM: Will we give you the one we've got?

NM: Well, first of all we'd like to - we have others, you know. Perhaps, maybe you'd prefer them. Are you sure you can recognise her?

NC: Yes. Oh my, we're good at recognising.

CM: Oh, we have her tagged.

NC: Yes. Tagged.

NM: Tagged?

JM: There's a crowd in the fank, mate.

NM: There are some good shepherds there. See Bunty there. Hey! Hey!

-?-: See Na-an. Bunty.

CM: See Na-an too. He's quite good. Na-an's better. I think he is a shepherd.

A woman: Na-an's good at them.

.....

NM: John! See this one. There now, and she's dry too. She's dry, as far as I know.

CM: Oh, she's all right. She's quite good, indeed.

NM: Yes, and she'll winter beautifully. Go on now.

CM: I don't believe she has the tag on her ear.

NM: Does she have the curl?

Woman: No.

JM: If she were on rye-grass for a bit...

NM: Oh, we'll have to ask Roddy in that case.

NC: She's too closely related to the beast we're...

NM: Oh, is that it?

NC: Yes. She's no good to us.

NM: Go on there. Try the top part of the fank. The best ones tend to run away.

.....

Bunty: Here you are now. Here your are now, mate. A Cheviot.

-?-: A Cheviot. What a Cheviot for you there, mate. From the hills of Morvern. Yes.

CM: Did you test her left ear; does it have the tag? If it doesn't have the tag...

....

NC: She wouldn't stay with us. She's been on grass for too long.

NM: No. She's been at this end for too long. If you have a good dog that would keep her down? Johnny, give them - what's his name again?

JM: Judy.

NM: Judy. Well, the next one, if she doesn't please you, you'll have to...

-?-: She was above the Glas-sgeir for too long.

.....

NM: There you are now. You can't possibly refuse that one, my friend.

You can't possibly refuse that one.

CM: She'll be no good in these parts.

NM: Now, there's none better in these parts.

CM: She's no good except on the mainland... unsettled now. And there's no excuse for you. It's too wet in these parts. No, you're no use this side. It's too wet here for her, mate.

NM: Oh, no until... comes.

NC: Oh, she's already sold.

NM: What!

NC: She's already sold.

NM: Ah, you made a mistake. Ah, try not to make me out dishonest whatever you do.

NC: She's marked, that one, boy, She's marked.

NM: You may be right, boy. Let's have another beast. Well, I don't know. There's still a beast or two to be found if you would bring them down.

.....

NC: Well, if it's a young animal. Try and find a young animal.

Na-an: It's coming, mate.

NM: There you are. They're terribly difficult, Johnny, to please. Here she is now. Here now.

CM: Here now, boy.

NM: Here now. Straight from the Big Islands. Right from the Shiants.

CM: Did she come from the House Island?

NM: The House Island. Yes. Ah, she looks it, friend.

NC: She'll be no good on the Hill of the Cave all the same.

NM: Will she not, Neil? In that case, see if you can find one that will do on the Hill of the Cave. I don't know what kind you want.

.....

NC: If she got her milk in Mary's Island, she's done for.

RC: She'll be no good on the grass here.

NM: Aye, aye! Well, there aren't many left in the fank any more, Neil.

Na-an: There's still a good one, mate.

NM: Is there?

Na-an: Yes. Still a good one.

-?: Na-an, Na-an.

NM: Try and get her. Oh, I hope to goodness that this is the one.

CM: That one's got the tag. Yes... A Spring sheep all right. This one will winter.

[There is a lot of confusion here, with many comments]

NM: I hope you'll produce a good breed now.

The dialogue opens with an overt acknowledgement of the two 'camps' symbolically arranged on opposite sides of the table with the groom between them. He is referred to by his representative as '*an duine hochd*', a 'poor soul', which inverted praise recalls the example above where the groom was described as a 'pitiful object'. The inversion continues as the subject moves to hospitality; the groom's side criticise what has been presented to them on 'the table', while the hosts defend the arrangements, which are complete '*co-dhiù cho fad 's a chì sinne*', 'as far as we can see'. What the table lacks, of course, is a partner for the groom-to-be. The inversion of hospitality, here represented by the guests' criticism - has been noted in other accounts. The game is continued by the hosts 'in a mock-defensive tone', according to MacLeod's marginal comment, and they thank the visitors for coming.

The hosts remark that their guests are lacking 'hoggs', and that this must be the purpose of the visit. They do not have many left - a reference to the fact that of his seven daughters only Bella, the bride-to-be, remains unmarried. The guests are asked whether they are looking to start a new stock - in other words, to get new blood into their own. Transplantation as an allegory of marriage was noted earlier as a theme present in an account from Harris, as well as in Bulgarian custom, where the matchmaker and prospective father-in-law told the host that they had seen and liked a rose in his courtyard and asked if he could transplant it into his own garden; 'the answer was either in the affirmative or a refusal under the pretext that the rose would not take root at the new place'.¹¹³ The theme of transplantation will recur later in the dialogue.

The visitors make a reference to the 'good price' they are willing to offer, and a

suggestion that they might find a suitable animal there is cut short by the host's retort that the 'selling' of his other beasts, his daughters, has cost him dear. His intervention, supported by his partner, ensures that the dialogue does not progress too quickly, and is a clear articulation of resistance and deliberate obstruction. The girl has been allegorised first as a hog, then a generic 'beast' and now as a dog, a favourite and irreplaceable pet. This is a form of eulogy, the praise and expression of reluctance to part with the girl placing further pressure on the groom's party. They counter hopefully that perhaps the cat could replace his pet, but this suggestion is emphatically rejected - it's not that easy - a remark that also refers to the task their adversaries face in winning them over.

The hosts confirm that they do have hogs for sale, and the 'buyers' confirm that they are of same stock as the girl's father - they must have a curl in their wool, a reference to the curly hair shared by the members of the family. This remark demonstrates the flexibility of the allegorical mode; skilfully employed, a commonplace zoological feature can be used to reveal details of the specific context to which the dialogue relates, as well as articulating general qualities which are common to 'any animal' and 'any woman'. The bride's side link tightness of curl with youth, and the visitors confirm that they are looking for young stock, new blood for their part of the island. The hosts affect not to understand why they have come to their croft in their search; we have noted this as a recurring feature of the ritual, and it represents a further example of resistance and deliberate prolongation; the visitors must justify themselves again. They praise their hosts' land, and the stock that prospered there; a reference to the large family they have raised. The bride's representatives present another obstacle; there are many things with curly hair, including

men; how can they tell the difference? (the dialogue was recorded in the 1970's, when the 'perming' of men's often lengthy hair was fashionable). The groom's party insist - they want a female. Her defenders counter with a bawdy pun; they are not going to start shearing the sheep to find out (the word '*rùsgadh*' can mean 'shearing' or 'stripping'). To 'go further' than stripping obviously carries a risqué meaning. The groom's representative states that in order to make a correct identification one must look for a 'tag'. The motif of the tag will later enable the groom's party to reject the women offered, quite apart from any other 'objections' which might be raised.

The bride's representatives are, for a moment, more encouraging; they invite the visitors to confirm they believe themselves to be in the right place to find good stock, and suggest that the visitors' own 'herd' is exhausted. That they have come to the right place is emphatically affirmed. Then follows another obstacle; the father has lost a lot of stock; he is reluctant to part with any more; and all that remains is 'a big dry ewe'. This is most probably a reference to the bride's mother, as Morag MacLeod points out. We will also recall the lower value that 'dry' animals represented in the currency of cattle noted above. Then there is a correction; they have a hog, but refuse to sell it; or they may, but point out that '*ghabh sùil oirre*', 'an evil eye has got at her'. This has made the beast 'terrible for wandering', which the groom's party may be able to cure. The animal is not 'settled', and cannot be described as 'sedate'. Aside from the suggestion of an initiation into sexual maturity, the animal motif also articulates what Lonsdale, speaking of Greek ritual, describes as 'a... transformation of a young girl from a wild, disorderly creature to a tame and nubile being'.¹¹⁴ The animal which 'tends to roam' or is 'unsettled' is comparable to the

bride in the Breton abduction ballad who is conceived of as a lively and restless horse which needs to be brought under control. This is linked to notions of domestication and submission; young women need someone to lead them, as well as belong to.

Perhaps it is the groom's influence, his excessive praise, for example, which has caused the 'evil eye', and results in her straining against the confines of her father's house. The situation can only be settled by her leaving for new pastures; the solution offered, we recall, for the 'ewe lamb that strays' in an earlier account from Harris. Another topical comment on society follows; young people are like this - they roam widely. They *might* have a sheep, a 'dry', that is non-milk producing one. If it cannot produce milk, then they will not part with it. But it will not always be dry; even their own stock can dry up. This is just as well, replies his partner. In other words, their women are not always pregnant. They would not part with it if it were to remain dry; in other words a condition of sale is that it produces a new breed. The important issues of praise, the 'unsettled animal', milk-production and the evil eye are dealt with in detail below.

It should be noted that the reference to 'silver water' alludes to the common charm against the evil eye. George Henderson describes the procedure:

In the averting ritual water had to be lifted in a *wooden* ladle at a stream over which the living and the dead passed; it was not suffered to touch the ground, and when taken up it was done in the name of the Sacred Trinity; silver coins were put into the ladle and also a copper coin; the whole was blessed with the sign of the cross, and according to a ritual of divination it was thought that a wise person could tell whether it was a male's or a female's eye that had been the bewitching agent. Thereafter the patient was sprinkled with some of the lustral water, and what remained over was dashed against a huge boulder-stone not likely ever to be moved. Evil was thus transferred for ever to the stone, and the 'evil eye' was lifted from off the sufferer.¹¹⁵

Another condition is raised by the girl's team; it depends on what meadow it would be sent to. This provides the opportunity for the groom's side, who have been silent all the while, to praise the young man: '*cha bhi dith innis oirre*', there will be no lack of grazing for it - if they can get hold of it. The bride's team reply with a maxim; 'it is easy to be generous in times of plenty, but in hard times...'; her defenders are still resisting every attempt at forward movement made by the groom's party. They repeat; the father had plenty of stock, but this has diminished; if he gives away the last, he will have no replacement. This remark turns into bawdy praise of the bride's father; when he was younger, he could have provided a replacement quickly. Now of course, his 'ewe' is also 'dry'.

The groom's side suggest that the bride's brothers-in-law could produce some 'reinforcements'. These reply that one of them, Finlay, is shy; Finlay replies that he has nothing to offer, which produces another bawdy remark from the bride's team.

They have a dog, they persist, continuing the defensive posture. The groom's party try to make progress, but the quick repartee gives way to a comic story from the bride's side, on the subject of late marriage and a man's reluctance and distaste for the institution. It includes a reference to local woman who had recently got married in her seventies. It should be remembered that the audience at the *rèiteach* numbered between seventy and eighty people, and the occasion is perhaps used to provide the licence for a rather belated *charivari*. The point of the story is to offer an inversion of the ideal state; the forced marriage of a bachelor and the late marriage of an elderly woman are the antithesis of the marriage about to take place between the young couple. Other remarks - by both sides - relating to the misprizing of the institution of marriage and the absence of love are

intended to express quite the opposite.

The story seems to have exhausted the patience of the groom's party, who press hard for progress. This is the signal for the beginning of the 'false bride' sequence, although the bride's side express doubt to the last possible moment: '*N toir sinn dhuibh an té a tha againn?*', 'will we give you the one we've got?' They express doubt that their visitors will be able to recognise the animal they want; the groom's side are sure - they have it 'tagged', the mechanism for refusal introduced earlier in the dialogue. Referring to the women, they are told that '*Tha crowd anns an fhaing*', there is a crowd in the fank. It is not clear whether the women are gathered in a separate space, perhaps through a doorway, or are simply taken and returned to their seats. As in other accounts there is an escort to deliver the women for inspection. Appropriately, he is a shepherd, and his experience is approved by both sides. The suggestion is that this is a role he has performed in the past.

The first 'sheep' is produced, and the salesman assures the buyer that it is 'dry', that is, not pregnant. She receives faint praise, followed by doubt that she has the identifying tag. The bride's side enquire as to whether she has the curly coat of their stock. The groom's side reply that she does not, and is therefore too closely related to their stock to consider for breeding. The woman is a relative of the groom, and the woman is therefore dismissed on thoroughly legitimate grounds. This is both skilful and humorous, although one will recall the reference made above by another Harris informant to the deep-rooted fear of incest shared by the islanders, and the remark may be said to have a more significant resonance than is at first apparent.

The groom's party are invited to try again, especially where the rebellious, that is,

the young ones gather. The next candidate, Morag MacLeod notes, is, however, a 'confirmed spinster of middle age or more'. The reason for refusal employs the 'transplantation' motif; the sheep is used to a certain kind of pasture and would not remain with them.

Another woman is presented, this time an incomer. The hosts apply some pressure; the visitors cannot possibly refuse this creature. Their refusal is blunt; again, she is accustomed to life in the mainland, where it is not as wet as on the island. A comic episode follows when it is noticed that the beast has already been sold - she is married - and the hosts protest that they should not be thought dishonest. The observation '*tha marc oirre siod*', 'she is marked', presumably refers to her wedding ring. We may compare this episode to the Breton example in which a woman was refused on the grounds that 'en l'examinant avec attention', one of her fingers was 'usé de frottement'; it had signs of friction or rubbing.¹¹⁶

The groom's side again show signs of impatience - they want to see a young animal, and the escort assures him that one is on its way. Such expressions of restlessness on the part of the groom's side find their parallel in the threats of the representative to leave and look elsewhere, as noted in the example from Finlay MacDonald above. The hosts remark that their visitors are difficult to please, and produce another incomer, to encouraging remarks reminiscent of animal herding. She is rejected for the same reason as the others; she is not of the right stock to thrive on the groom's land.

The hosts keep their resistance up until the end, claiming not to know what kind of animal the groom's party is seeking. The escort finally ushers in the bride-to-be; she has

the 'tag' and is a '*Caora an Earraich*', a spring sheep. The dialogue ends with the bride's party exhorting the production of a 'good breed' by the couple.

One of the most striking features of the dialogue is the relative passivity and silence of the groom's party in comparison with the bride's. Of 173 separate utterances, the groom's party make 53; a contribution of around 31%. In character these are short, matter of fact, rather humourless and often made with the explicit intention of advancing the ritual to its conclusion rather than actively participating in the allegorical invention of the dialogue. It could be argued that this merely reflects the personalities involved, or their verbal skill; the most likely reason, however, is that the discrepancy between the two parties is entrenched in tradition. We have already remarked that the groom's party represent the male principle and are physically dominant; this finds expression in, for example, the firing of weapons. Despite having instigated the meeting and being relatively certain of success, they find themselves, however, in a lower, passive, submissive role as they are obliged to ask the father's permission to carry off the girl. She is the 'property' of her father, and we have noted the use of indirect forms including allegory and the motif of buying and selling in order to control and limit the discussion to 'safe' modes of expression. The ritual asking is not, therefore, a battle between equals. Like ritual entry, the girl's representatives are in total control of the discussion, which itself resembles a trial or ordeal more than a competition. Examples from Bulgaria and Wales showed how verbal testing and obstruction followed physical trials. The performance of the bride's party in this example from Harris is characterised by the exercise of control, obstructive verbal behaviour and teasing, as well as a variety of examples of verbal skill, such as puns, jokes,

maxims, tale-telling, topical references, satire and praise. The groom's party have a far more limited range of expression, tending towards more reactive, prosaic language which is serious in tone. This is appropriate; the *rèiteach* is an occasion for the bride's family to indulge in a proud verbal display which reflects their (temporarily) superior position and aggrandises their 'stock'. The audience are gathered to watch not a bardic contest as such, but to appreciate the inventiveness with which the girl's family obstruct and frustrate the efforts of the groom's party to achieve union. The polar opposites of comic and serious represented by the two parties contribute much to the hilarity; if the groom's representative were just as funny, or worse, even more inventive, witty and amusing than the bride's, the result would be utter confusion. Final union is the purpose of the meeting, a 'clearing away', a 'disentanglement' which leads to an affirmation of 'harmony'; but this is achieved after a period of 'chaos' and disorder, from which 'cosmos' emerges. Such disorder is, however, carefully stage-managed; the natural hierarchy may be inverted, but the rules of engagement and the boundaries applying are known to all and are as durable as the four walls against which the audience are leaning.

This account also makes clear the desire of the participants to be entertaining. The audience, formerly quasi-official 'witnesses' are gathered mainly to the delight in wordplay and the ritual drama of the 'false brides', as well as witnessing the 'sharing of the cup' which surely followed. In this example, besides the working in of specificity to the allegory, genealogy and social censure are also featured; the audience is reminded that *x* is related to *y*, as well as hearing an affirmation of shared community values in the form of a satire of an errant contemporary. These messages are communicated through burlesque inversion

of normal codes, for example of modes of address and hospitality, and as such do indeed resemble the periods of licence afforded during certain religious festivals, as one informant remarked.

V. Conclusion

Analysis of betrothal rituals from Celtic-speaking cultures and those from elsewhere allows a tentative statement of common elements of the ceremonial sequence to be made. Two of these, ritual entry, inversion and the problem of praise will be dealt with in some detail in the following chapters. What follows is an outline of other recurring features.

a. Structure

The two-part structure which forms the basis of the Gaelic betrothal ritual; - *còrdadh* or *rèiteach beag*, the 'agreement'; *rèiteach* or *rèiteach mòr*, 'the contract'; is found elsewhere: In Brittany the initial visit at which the girl's hand is sought is termed *akord*; as in Scotland this is a private occasion and in Brittany accomplished in near-secrecy.¹¹⁷ This is followed by the *frikot dimézi*, the betrothal feast, at which large numbers of the local community are present. This precedes the marriage ceremony, which itself begins with a further 'reasking' at the *ar goulen*, the 'fetching of the bride'. There may also be mutual visits between the families, amounting to a ritual 'inspection' termed *ar weladenn*. As we have seen, there is a strong suggestion that in both societies these amounted to a secular marriage, and the Breton tradition provided evidence that the official act of union was performed by a bard. The two rituals could be combined in Scotland.

In Bulgaria an identical structure was noted; a successful matchmaking visit, which was conducted in secret, was followed by the *maluk godezh*, 'small betrothal' which was attended by close family members and at which the date of the wedding was discussed, and then the *godezh*, 'big betrothal' at which all family members were present and the dowry negotiated. There was no need for this two-part ritual if the two families knew one another well and negotiation was therefore unnecessary, and as a result the two occasions were combined. The groom, however, was absent from both. In all cases, the less well the families know one another, the more highly ritualised the meetings; the two sides are 'insulated' from possible conflict by the use of intermediaries and verbal and non-verbal strategies employing inversion, indirect expression, preamble, allegory and other collective fictions. A matchmaker or verbally-skilled non-kin appointee fulfilled the role of 'master of ceremonies' in many examples. Communal incorporation rites in the form of shared eating and drinking are common to all, as is the tradition of door-to-door invitations. The latter are carried out by the bride and groom or their proxies in Scotland, and in verse by the *bazvalan* in Brittany, the bidder in Wales and the *kalesari* in Bulgaria.

If we compare the *ar goulen* and the *rèiteach*, we immediately recall the Breton ritual featured, besides the bride, only a little girl, a widow (or married woman) and an old woman, compared to the extended sequence of multiple candidates in the *rèiteach*. The characters of the Breton ritual may be seen as representing extreme youth, a woman past child-bearing age, and extreme age. These characters are present in several accounts of a *rèiteach*, but supplemented by a variable number of 'extras' who have been 'rounded up' more or less indiscriminately. We also recall a Harris informant's observation that the

'master-of-ceremonies' knew which women had been selected in advance, and could then prepare his witty responses. In other words, the Breton ritual can be seen as offering a more purely symbolic life-cycle drama, with no candidates introduced solely for the purpose of merriment. This may indicate a more archaic form.

Although only one informant, from Harris, described the 'false bride' sequence as a 'drama', various 'dramatic' elements were noted in the rituals we have described. These invite comparison with more widespread and well-known forms of ritual drama.¹¹⁸ Although the following may not be present in every ritual, the main features noted are:

1. performance in a separated acting space (e.g. a circle formed by onlookers, the threshold) and the corresponding notion of 'on-stage' and 'off-stage' (e.g. participants hidden in a separate room, doors opening and closing across threshold)
2. presence of a 'presenter' figure
3. a 'calling-on' sequence cued by the presenter and in some cases effected by 'ushers'
4. formality of movement
5. opening address and concluding formulas

b. Allegorical motifs

In Brittany the groom's party used the **lost animal** motif (bird), in Wales a suggestion of the **wanderers** formula, in Poland the **lost animal** (goose) was noted, while in Bulgaria all known motifs were present; **lost animal** (heifer); **hunters** (falcon hen); **fellow farmers** -

joining objects (sheep, fence); **transplantation** (rose) and **traders** (heifer, mule). The most common type is **traders** in search for a female counterpart for their bull, ox, duck or gander. Some elements of the Bulgarian examples are strikingly similar to those found in Scotland; the transplantation of a rose is refused because it would not take root at the new place, the falcon hen is no longer considered part of the family since she has begun flying far and wide herself, traders have heard that the girl's family have goods they would like to buy. It should be noted that while the motif of **transplantation** is used in the 'refusal sequence' in Scotland to reject an unsuitable candidate, in Bulgaria this is employed at the outset of negotiations and provides a face-saving pretext for refusal of the matchmaker. Although there is no evidence to support this application in Scotland, it remains a strong possibility that the allegorical motifs could function in the same way, to provide the girl's family with a method of communicating refusal without causing offence. This would be particularly necessary in a culture where the unannounced arrival of groups of men 'on spec' was a possibility. On available evidence, the 'refusal sequence' does not appear to have formed part of the custom in Bulgaria.

c. Delivering the bride

A ceremonial presentation of the bride at her future home was only found in an account of tradition in the North East of Scotland, and there is no record of any ritual dialogue accompanying the occasion. Walter Gregor's description is valuable, however, as it has close similarities with the custom noted in Bulgaria and elsewhere. This in turn suggests that there is a possibility that there was a verbal element to the ritual proceedings:

When the bride arrived, she was welcomed by the bridegroom's mother, if alive. If she was dead, the welcome was given by one of the bridegroom's nearest relatives. When passing over the threshold there was held over the bride's head a sieve containing bread and cheese, which were distributed among the guests. They were sometimes scattered around her, when there was a rush by the young folks to secure a piece... In some districts, when the sieve was in the act of being placed over her head, it was the bridegroom's duty to snatch her from below it. She was led straight to the hearth, and into her hands was put the tongs, with which she made up the fire. The besom was at times substituted for the tongs, when she swept the hearth. The *crook* was swung three times around her head, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and with the prayer, 'May the Almighty mack this umman a gueede wife'. The last act of her installation as 'gueedewife' was leading her to the *girmal*, or *mehl-bowie*, and pressing her hand into the meal as far as possible. This last action, it was believed, secured in all time coming abundance of the staff of life in the household. In some of the villages it was usually the custom for children to assemble round the door, and demand *ba-siller*, when a few coppers were given... A good many beggars commonly gathered together, and they were regaled most plentifully...¹¹⁹

We note the presence of ritual language, although monologic, and the direct association between the bride's perceived fertility and the effect on the wider community, who battle for a piece of the bread with which she was 'baptised'. Her potency also extends to her new family, who will partake of the meal she has herself anointed. The focus on the hearth, whether the tools associated with it or sweeping the area around is in line with similar customs noted above. The presence of children and beggars is also a familiar one, and one can speculate that the entertaining of the latter arose from reasons similar to those noted in Brittany. There, the beggars were associated with the dead, and notwithstanding the feelings of generosity which may pervade the occasion, one suspects that it would require external ritual pressure of this kind to share hard-won food and drink with society's lowest. It may be that the children were present at the wedding itself, in which case their

involvement in extracting further payment - in essence the setting up of an obstruction - can be seen as a 'replaying' of the earlier event, confirming a close identification of the two rites in the popular imagination.

d. Delivering the dowry

Again, Gregor's study is the only source found for a suggestion that the delivery of the bride's goods was in some way ritualised:

Beside the *providan*... the woman brought a chest of drawers, or, if that was too costly, a *kist*. All the *providan* was sent to the future home a few days before the marriage, and it was sent unlocked and unbound. To have sent it locked or bound would have entailed difficult travail.¹²⁰

Although again there is no reference to any ritual language that may have accompanied the handing over of the goods, it is of note that they are presented without barriers to the opening and revealing of the material worth which represents the bride herself. This is, of course, in contrast to rituals of resistance - the locked and barred door, for example - which are designed to make the handing over of the bride both protracted and difficult. The relationship between these two rituals was noted above with regard to the customs of Brittany.

Notes

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Edward Dwelly, ed., The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary 8th ed. (Glasgow: Gairm, 1973) 754.

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2. In his note to the dictionary entry, Rev. Fr. MacDonald notes 'sometimes as important as the wedding feast itself'.

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7. Statutes 39.

8. Statutes 71-3.

9. Statutes 142-3.

10. Statutes 267-8.

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Society ed. R.B. Outhwaite (London: Europa, 1981) 216.

14.R.W. Scribner, The German Reformation (London: Macmillan, 1986) 62.

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19.Boyd 101.

20.Boyd 116.

21.Nicholls, Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages 73.

22.Nicholls 73.

23.Marriage in Ireland 40.

24.Patrick J. Corish, 'Catholic Marriage Under the Penal Code'. Marriage in Ireland 68.

25.Marriage in Ireland 30.

26.Murdo Ewan MacDonald, Harris. SA1996.97. Recorded by the author. The prefix 'SA' denotes the sound archive of the School of Scottish Studies.

27.Donald Sinclair, Tiree. SA1968/248/A1. Recorded by Eric Cregeen.

28.Charles Rogers, Scotland Social and Domestic (London: Griffin, 1869) 220. Sometimes a 'cautioner' was needed who 'became bound that they would not cohabit before receiving the nuptial benediction'. (367-8)

29.MacDonald MS 57: 5383. In the archives of the School of Scottish Studies. In a supernatural tale, a groom-to-be in this liminal state narrowly avoids death from a shape-shifting monster which is following him. Rev. Norman MacDonald, Skye. SA 1956/13/A4, SA 1957/97/A7. Recorded by James Ross.

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31. Alexander Stewart, A Highland Parish, or, The History of Fortingall (Glasgow, Maclaren, 1928) 156-7.
32. I. F. Grant, Highland Folkways (London: Routledge, 3rd ed. 1989) 244.
33. Walter Gregor, Notes on the Folklore of the North-East of Scotland (London: Folklore Society, 1881) 57.
34. J.F. Campbell, Popular Tales of the West Highlands (1860) (Wildwood: Hounslow reprint, 1983) 2: 23.
35. Roderick MacKillop, Berneray. SA 1977/44/A2. Recorded by Dr Emily Lyle.
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37. A.W. Moore, The Folklore of the Isle of Man (London: Nutt, 1891) 158. See also Margaret Killip, The Folklore of the Isle of Man (London: Batsford, 1975) 78.
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44. Gilleasbuig Mac Aonghais, Spean Bridge. Calum MacLean Notebook 10: 950.
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46. Donald Sinclair, Tiree. SA 1968/248.A1. Recorded by Eric Cregeen.

47. James Kirkwood, A Collection of Highland Rites and Customs ed. J.L. Campbell. (Cambridge: Folklore Society, 1975) 76.
48. See William J. Watson, Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore, (1937, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press for The Scottish Texts Society, 1978) 66-81.
49. Walter Gregor, Notes on the Folklore of the North-East of Scotland (London: Folklore Society, 1881) 88, 178. The *providan* is the bride's marriage outfit.
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79. Cambry 247
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81. Roderick MacKillop, Berneray. SA1978/78.A8. Recorded by Ian Paterson.
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- 92.Commenting on the same account, Isabel Grant notes 'the girl would show her concurrence by staying in the room, and the father would capitulate.' Highland Folk Ways 363.
- 93.John MacDonald, Kyles Paible. SA 1968/74 A12/B1. Recorded by Eric Cregeen.
- 94.Annie Sinclair, Barra. SA 1974/95.B. Recorded by Mary MacDonald and Dr Emily Lyle.
- 95.Kate MacColl, Barra. SA 1970/348.B4. Recorded by Mary MacDonald.
- 96.'Reiteach, A Scottish Engagement Rite' Cape Breton's Magazine 5 (1973) 20.
- 97.Rev. John Lane Buchanan, Travels in the Western Hebrides: from 1782-1790 (London: Robinson and Debrett, 1793) 163-8.
- 98.Fergus Kelly, A Guide to Early Irish Law (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988) 113-4. Below the three year-old heifer was the two year-old *colpthach*, worth a third of a milch cow, the *dairt* or yearling at one quarter, and the *dartaid* or yearling bullock at one eighth. Values below this are calculated in sheep, fleeces and sacks of grain.
- 99.Flora MacCuish, Berneray. SA 1969/82.A3. Recorded by Ian Paterson.

100. Ronald Black, unpublished draft of The Gaelic Calendar, 1993: 94. I am grateful to Dr Black for allowing access to this source.

101. Flora MacCuish, Berneray. SA 1967/90.B3. Recorded by Ian Paterson.

102. Ann MacLeod, Berneray, collected by Elizabeth Kerr, Port Charlotte, Islay, 1895. MacLagan MS, Vol II: 213.

103. Christina Shaw and Mrs. Peggy Morrison, sisters, Bun Amhuinn Eadarra, Harris. SA 1977/182.B7. Translation by Morag MacLeod. Reproduced in Tocher 30.

104. Finlay J. MacDonald, Crowdie and Cream: Memoirs of a Highland Childhood (London: Futura MacDonald, 1983) 87-92.

105. Murdo Ewan MacDonald; see below.

106. Catherine Morrison, Scalpay. SA 1963/46.A3. Translation by Morag MacLeod and printed in Tocher 30: 382.

107. Murdo Ewan MacDonald, Scadabaigh, Harris. SA1996.97. Interviewed by the author.

108. Donald Morrison, Mull. SA 1969/140.A6. Recorded by Alan Bruford. Spelling as transcribed.

109. Billy Kay, ed. Odyssey: Voices from Scotland's Recent Past (Edinburgh, Polygon, 1980) 94-5.

110. Jessie Nicholson, Scalpay. Odyssey

111. Morag MacLeod, op. cit. 385.

112. Spelling as in source.

113. Radost 16

114. Lonsdale 184. The author details several female initiation rites in which the girls are given animal identities, and animal or bird metaphors are used to symbolise such attributes as submission - which presupposes a prior state of restlessness or lack of control (196-205).

115. Henderson 301

116. Cambry 165.

117. In a private communication Dr John Shaw of the School of Scottish Studies has suggested that the terms *còrdadh* and *akord* may have a common etymology.

118. Aside from structural similarities, we may note, for example, that present in both the 'wooing play' and many marriage rituals is a speech outlining the life that a married woman can expect, which amounts to praise of the married state and the condemnation of celibacy, a theme particularly well-developed in many examples of the rituals under discussion.

119. Walter Gregor, Notes on the Folklore of the North-East of Scotland (London: Folklore Society, 1881) 92. The 'crook' is defined by Gregor as 'the small chain with a hook in the lower end that hangs over the fire from which the pots, &c., are suspended when cooking is going on.'

120. Gregor, Folklore 88.

Chapter Six

Space, Boundaries and Ritual entry

I. Introduction

The location in which the ritual dialogues take place and the implied importance of spatial relationships, boundaries, and thresholds have been briefly noted in the preceding chapters, and a closer analysis of the ritual concepts behind such organisation may now be offered.

The tripartite structure of separation, transition and incorporation which characterises the marriage ritual indicates a symbolic conception of the change in the central figures' social positions, a step-by-step movement towards the public acknowledgement of new status, identities and responsibilities. This symbolic movement is linked with actual spatial passage, with 'physical passage accomplished in stages', as Van Gennep states, adding 'this symbolic and spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another'.¹ In patrilocal societies, there is a fundamental asymmetry in the 'journeys' undertaken by the bride and groom. As the groom's party set out to ask for the girl, or replay this event in the fetching of the bride, the groom is already publicly acknowledged to have 'turned his back' on his home and bachelor peers, and is therefore in a state of transition. For the woman, however, this rite of separation has not yet begun. Although the wedding ends with both central figures achieving higher status, further asymmetry is evident in the fact that the groom returns to his own world while the bride turns away from hers permanently. This lack of symmetry may explain why the ritual

events cluster around the separation and incorporation of the bride more than the groom; examples of these are the customs of 'fetching the bride' and 'delivering the bride'. The concealing of the bride on the morning of the wedding, her adoption of a ritual silence and wearing of a veil indicate the liminal, transitional state which precedes her departure and eventual incorporation and 'rebirth' with a new identity. Most rites centre on the bride for the reason that the whole process, leading to a successful outcome and the creation of progeny, centres on her consent (although, as we have seen, parental consent is also a factor). For this reason, states Radost, the wedding 'is the most unstable link in the chain of family rituals because it depends on individual will'.² It is the bride who will make the actual passage to the other side, renouncing the company of her family and peers, and accepting the role of 'outsider' in the groom's home. The last of these is, incidentally, overseen by another 'outsider', her mother-in-law. These symbolic patterns are widespread; for a Chinese bride,

seclusion in the limbo of the transition period is a part of the actual transit from her own home to her husband's... she is heavily veiled and carried in a closed sedan chair, sometimes in a box inside it, from one house to the other, and if the distance between them is actually not long, she will be taken in a roundabout way to make it appear so and to emphasise the change she is making.³

In a similar way, the Harris bride of the 1920s 'would prefer to walk [to church]... on the way back everybody waved towels, shouted at them and wished them well; some people got up to the hills above and fired volleys'.⁴ The shunning of obvious alternative modes of transport indicates more than a desire to broadcast news, involve the locality and prolong an enjoyable, once-in-a-lifetime event, although these are clearly motives. This is evidence of the importance of moving through actual space as a parallel, symbolic expression of the

passage towards a new mode of being. The areas of 'unorganised' space through which the bride's party travel are expressive of the girl's liminal state; in-between areas, neither wholly of or outside the community, temporary places between the life's journey or actual passage between the father's home and that of the groom's. The bride or her proxy will also have circumambulated the village in order to deliver invitations, an event which also has the effect of delineating the borders of 'one's own' as opposed to that of the 'alien', and we have noted many examples in which the groom's party are characterised as 'strangers' and 'travellers'.

We have seen that dialogues take place in a neutral zone between the two camps, over the threshold of the bride's or groom's home, with the door open or closed, from a window to the ground below and over opposite sides of a table or fireplace. While these locations emphasise the parties' separateness and contrariness, they also symbolise the potential for the boundaries to be penetrated since the space is regulated in such a way as to make passage 'two-way'. This is most obviously seen in entry and exit rites, as well as, for example, the escorting of the bride to the end of the table occupied by her future husband and party, another symbolic 'journey' to the other side, and her careful placing in the church beside her husband at their 'kirking'.

The space inside the home is regulated, 'controlled' space, and the preservation of 'luck' or 'goodness' within its boundaries and anxiety over its loss through liminal areas forms the basis of many customs, including those seasonal rites where entry can be made unchallenged. Those areas of the house 'penetrable' are the doors, windows, chimney and keyhole. An example of this is the Highland prohibition on looking at a funeral through a

window or standing in a door.⁵ In Scotland the marriage bidder entered the house, but the funeral bidder did not, delivering his message across the threshold.⁶ Doors are preferred for entry and exit rites, although the Breton 'delivering the dowry' exchange took place between the groom's family inside at a window, and the bride's party in the street below. This is perhaps intended to emphasise a *decrease* in the potential for entry, an increased level of resistance. Interestingly, it is here the male side who are expressing resistance, and it may be that this indicates the conception of a higher level of boundary appropriate to the groom's side. The later 'delivering of the bride' exchange is at the threshold, perhaps indicating a lower level of resistance, and a higher potential for entry. This is further suggested by the structural similarities between the two rites. The first is the acceptance of the bride's goods, which one suspects represented a form of contract and is thus a highly-charged public statement of intent. The second is the acceptance of the bride, which is effectively a foregone conclusion. All exchanges at the bride's home collected for this study take place at the threshold, the 'two-way' boundary; refusal is not an option since resistance is always accompanied by the potential for entry. A door is penetrable and controllable, a window generally is not; it has no hinges, it is not where strangers request entry. We will recall the Polish and Russian examples where the bride's family took no responsibility for the opening of the door which admitted the groom's family; it 'opened itself'. In other words, they abdicated the degree of control normally obtaining to the door which separates their world with that outside. It may also be that doors opening by themselves were an indication of the arrival of other-worldly spirits of some kind, a further link between marriage and seasonal custom. The same voluntary ceding of control and

suspension of resistance, whilst common enough in seasonal customs like 'guising' can also be seen to operate, for example, in the *rèiteach* where the visitors not only entered the house but even the girl's bedroom.⁷

Windows are also used in some cultures for the removal of suicides and the dead, and there is some evidence that the back door was also an alternative site for some rites. Beyond this space is a gradual progression to 'uncontrolled' space, from the threshold to the edge of the family's land, for example the courtyard entrance, where dialogues occur in the Bulgarian tradition, and from there to the boundary of the community, where again agonistic rites, whether verbal or physical, may take place as the bride or groom move in or out of these areas. The family within its home and the community within its boundaries are perceived of as a highly cohesive social group, the village as a total social entity. Wedding parties may be obliged to take particular routes or cross bridges or water⁸ and as the bride or groom make their way through uncontrolled, neutral areas towards 'hostile' or 'new' territory, overcoming obstacles and performing tasks which counter the resistance of their respective families, these territories become at least temporarily neutral since they now occupy it without challenge and are no longer considered totally 'alien'. Of territorial passage Van Gennep remarks 'the neutral zone shrinks progressively till it ceases to exist except as a simple stone, a beam, or a threshold'.⁹

Although passage through territory may in some cases render it neutral, there is evidence to suggest that the area outside the community boundary presented particular dangers to liminal figures in a period of transition. We have previously noted a possible function of the prohibition of movement between betrothal and marriage as representing

the fear that the betrothed may not fulfil the promises made and back out of the process *in medias res*. Many cultures impose restrictions on those engaged to be married, and this has often been interpreted as an imposition of moral rectitude, the acknowledgement of new adult status and the acceptance of a more limited social orbit. While this is almost certainly the case, the concept of distance may be explored further. A Gaelic tale describes how a man between his *rèiteach* and his marriage is tempted away from his thatching in order to accompany a friend from Steishal to Kilmuir. The journey involves crossing the open moorland. The men are followed by a protean, evil monster, and the man suffers a temporary change in his personality, becoming aggressive and reckless, before they eventually make their escape. The informant concludes the tale by stating 'The man, as I said, was between his betrothal and his marriage, and perhaps that is, as it were, the explanation of the story'.¹⁰

That those lacking a ritually-defined and publicly acknowledged identity and place in the social hierarchy were in danger from spirits is clear; this also finds expression in the anxiety surrounding liminal periods between the changing seasons, for example at Hallowe'en. The belief that the betrothed should not venture any distance from the community until the ritual sequence is concluded may be connected with this belief; the tale may also to some degree express an anxiety that the process of transition may not be completed since travel from the home raises the possibility that the individual may fail to return.

II. Entries

a. The hearth, and entry into territory

An examination of other boundary customs may help explain some of the features of marriage ritual. We have noted that the bride may be identified with the hearth, located near there during discussions and performing some ritual action, for example being given the tongs to stir the fire as a form of incorporation. It is clear that the hearth was a central symbol of life, prosperity and occupation. Naturally, its importance was particularly marked during the dark, winter half of the year. We may mention the 'smoorings' accompanied by charms in Gaelic Scotland, the *anhuddo* ('covering') and *dadanhuddo* ('uncovering') rituals in Wales,¹¹ and the Hogmanay visitor bringing coals or peat to augment the fire. Ownership was also linked to the establishment of a hearth, as Owen points out:

The squatters cottage, hastily built overnight, was not complete - and his right to ownership not established - until smoke issued through the chimney the following morning. According to Welsh Laws, the *pentanfaen* (hearth stone or fireback stone) once placed in position might not be removed, even though the house were deserted; it stood as a perpetual sign that the site was once that of an occupied homestead. Chalked patterns drawn on the hearth and carved figures near the doorways 'protected' the hearth.¹²

The progressive forward movement of the groom's party may be thought of as his representative leading a formal bid to gain possession of the bride, around whom are placed 'protecting' forces. The gradual, step-by-step movement which characterises the groom's party's advance towards the interior and the hearth, may have a parallel in Celtic property law. In early Irish territorial law, the *tellach* was a ritual procedure whereby one might establish a hereditary claim to land against sitting occupants. Defined in this context as 'making an entry upon and taking possession of land' the word also denotes 'hearth and

fireplace, and 'household and family'.¹³ In its earliest form it consisted entirely of ritual actions. There were two stages: first, the claimant enters the ground on three occasions, over the grave mounds which stand at the boundary, the *fertae*. These occasions are termed *céttealach* ('first entry'), *tellach medónach* ('middle entry') and *tellach déidenach* ('final entry').¹⁴ There is a ten-day gap between these occasions, and after the first two he must retire, giving the occupant the opportunity to submit to arbitration. The movement towards incorporation is further symbolised by first going with two yoked horses in hand, then with four which are unyoked and free to graze. On the first occasion he enters with one witness, on the next with two. On the third entry the claimant comes with eight horses and three witnesses, and is allowed to stable and feed the animals on the land. Of the claimant's periodic withdrawal, T.M. Charles-Edwards remarks that he 'waits to see whether his ritual pressure has induced the defendant to go to law or concede the case'. If the occupant resists, another entry is made. The second stage of the ritual is the taking of possession, after three entries have produced no reaction. To finally stake his claim, the claimant stays overnight, kindles a fire and looks after the livestock. Charles-Edwards observes,

The centre of attention... has shifted from the boundary of the land... to the house... The claim is made at the boundary, and on the land within the boundary; the satisfaction of the claim is shown at the house... Whereas the action had turned on the relationship between claimant, horses and land, it now turns on the relationship between the claimant and the fire at the centre of the house. The first phase is agricultural and its setting is the land; the second phase is domestic. Together they reflect the ancient complex of house and land.¹⁵

A legendary judge Sencha decreed that the procedure for female entry should be the same as for males, but blisters appeared on his face 'as a sign that this was a false judgement' and

the separate law of *bantellach* was initiated by Brig, a female judge.¹⁶ It differs mainly in that the claimant's witnesses are women, the time between entries is reduced to eight days, and rightful possession is finally symbolised by her bringing a kneading-trough and a sieve for baking.

Charles-Edwards also describes a Welsh analogue, the *dadannudd*, a ritual whose name is clearly related to *dadanhuddo*, the ritual surrounding the uncovering of the hearth, mentioned above.¹⁷

Several parallels with marriage ritual may be noted. In the territorial ritual there is a progressive movement over boundaries of land and threshold towards the hearth, accompanied by a parallel progression of claim and counter-challenge. Witnesses serve to support the claim, and although Charles-Edwards offers no suggestion as to why such a multi-stage ritual should have been created, it may well be that a desire to avoid direct conflict and the risk of feud lay behind its inception. The movement between the two phases of 'agricultural' and domestic' may be compared to those examples in which the bride is initially identified with the father's stock - as an animal - and thus with the agricultural sphere 'outside'. After incorporation, the bride is 'humanised', and stress laid on domestic concerns 'inside' such as housekeeping and the importance of joint work. We have previously noted the positioning of the bride near the hearth, or her involvement with rites connected to it, further suggesting a link between the outsider's steady progression towards possession of this area and that of the groom's representative's eventual 'ownership' of the bride. These parallels suggest that the groom's party's claim of right, particularly noted in 'fetching the bride' customs, may be linked to the law governing

territorial claim. This rite is carried out in silence, accomplished by ritual movement and action rather than words; but the pattern of provocation and response is unmistakable. Just as defeat in a verbal contest allows entry to be made legitimately, resulting in displacement and rearrangement of some kind - one thinks of the Welsh poet replacing the household bard - the initiation of challenge and the overcoming of resistance in the *tellach* results in entry and occupation. The possibility that participants in betrothal rituals were cognisant of such a law must be considered, and they may, in effect, have been 'quoting' such an arrangement in a parodic spirit; the girl is not really 'property', nor have the visitors arrived to turn the girl's family out of their house; but a method of acquisition entrenched in customary law is used to provide a necessary basis for claim, however seriously this is meant.¹⁸ The 'multiple entry' mechanism may be the structure underlying the 'replaying' of the first visit to the bride's house; they leave, but they will return to ask again, and finally enter to stake their claim.

b. Entry in search of lost property

Another legal parallel involves the mechanisms enabling search for an animal to be made on the land of another, which can be usefully compared to the allegorical motifs of the 'lost animal' and the 'stray'. We noted earlier that matchmakers, as with the Celtic herald, are given a freedom of movement denied to ordinary individuals. The Breton *bazvalan* could ignore territorial boundaries and cross ripe fields to mediate between two rival camps. The law surrounding the search for a lost animal allowed the seeker a similar freedom. Thomas Pennant describes this law in 18th century Highland Scotland; when it was discovered that

an animal or animals were missing,

the owners, as soon as the discovery was made rose in arms, and with all their friends made instant pursuit, tracing the cattle by their track for perhaps scores of miles. Their nicety in distinguishing that of their cattle from those that were only casually wandering, or driven, was amazingly sagacious. As soon as they arrived on an estate where the track was lost, they immediately attacked the proprietor, and would oblige him to recover the track from his land forwards, or to make good the lost they had sustained. This custom had the force of law...¹⁹

In fact, the law stated:

It is leafum to ony man followand the fute of a theif, or beift thiftuoufle ftollin, with ane fleuth-hound, to enter within ony man's landis, without licence of the Lord of the ground: And gif ony man enteris without licence, and apprehendis the thief with the gudis in his poffeffion... the thief may be, without delay, condemnit thairfoir... Gif ony perfoun has ftollin ony cattel or gudis, and beand followit with clamour and fhout of the nichtbouris, is apprehendit in poffeffion thairfoir, he may incontinent be demanit as ane commoun theif: And ficlike, gif in the ficht of the nichtbouris followand him, he leivis the cattel or gudis ftollin, nevertheles he may be judgit and demanit...²⁰

We note the role played by the claimant's supporters or 'nichtbouris'. The same rule applied in Ireland:

According to the invariable rule of Irish law, if stolen cattle or other goods were tracked to a man's land the owner of the land must either follow the track further or accept responsibility for the theft.²¹

In other words, the onus of proof was on the owner of the land to prove that the lost animal was not in his possession. The seeker and his supporters, who might be considered witnesses to the occasion, could enter providing they had reason to believe he was guilty.

These witnesses were most likely fellow kin, as Jenny Wormald points out:

The late sixteenth-century lawyer James Balfour of Pittendreich stressed the point that it was the kin, never the individual, who must accuse and pursue the criminal. Letters of slain had to be given by the 'four branches of kin', two on the father's side, two on the mother's... the Scottish kin-

group was still an immensely large unit, whose part in private justice was still of fundamental importance.²²

We will recall those examples where the 'lost animal' formula is employed when asking for the girl, and the matchmaker repeatedly attempts to gain entry 'to search for himself', having 'heard' that the owner was in possession of it/her. This in turn may be related to the 'hidden bride' custom, where once entry is made a general search is carried out for the seeker's 'property'. The role of the figure who demands entry is of interest. As we have seen, the matchmaker's role resembles that of the bard and the herald; he adopts a ceremonial role as well as that of the poet and carries out the marriage ritual. There is some evidence from early medieval Lombard and Burgundian law to suggest that the tracing of animals was the province of a learned class, skilled in ritual. Katherine F. Drew first describes the attitude to trespass and theft:

The much greater value of some rural objects is demonstrated by the provision that theft of such an object was to entail an eightfold return of the object stolen... such valuable objects were the plow, the dog, the horse and the boar or pig... That anyone entering another's courtyard at night without giving notice was considered a thief is clear... such a man might be killed with impunity...

The skilled individual employed for the search of lost animals was the *proditor*,

a semi-official informer or 'waypointer' whose services were rendered chiefly in connection with strayed livestock. Among some of the barbarians this individual seems to have been almost a diviner... whose usefulness was acquired by occult arts.²³

If the search for animals was similarly ritualised in Celtic society, and the *proditor* given a degree of enhanced mobility, then perhaps the ritual figure who arrives at the girl's courtyard demanding entry was carrying out his 'semi-official' role in a similar parodic spirit to those taking part in the territorial claim ritual outlined above.

c. The entry rights of the *Cliar Sheanchain*

The arrival of a group demanding entry is also a feature of the West Highland tradition of the *Cliar Sheanchain*, itinerant poets who 'went along Gentlemen's Houses, giving Account of their Genealogies, and as they were rewarded return'd either a Satyr or Panegyric'.²⁴ As their reputation declined, their presence was not always a welcome one, particularly since their stay could potentially extend to a year and a day. As one observer notes, 'Senchan was the successor... of the leader of the poets of Ireland at the time of the convention of Drum Ceatt in 575, when St. Columba saved them from banishment which was sought because of the burdensomeness of their exactions'.²⁵ One of the sanctioned methods of removal was to defeat the visitors in a contest of wits. This could amount to *silencing* the visiting poets; if no suitable reply was forthcoming, the band had to admit defeat and leave. This may present further evidence of a connection between verbal skill and ritual entry. Whilst in the Welsh and Breton customs entry is secured by winning a verbal contest, the tradition of the *Cliar Sheanchain* represents the reverse; entry cannot be refused but the visitor's *exit* secured by verbal skill on the part of their hosts. If 'set upon' by the band, local bards could take up the challenge and engage the *Cliar Sheanchain* in a contest, seeking their removal:

Primary among the countermeasures were trials of wit and repartee, termed *bearradairachd* or *gearradh cainnte*, between the *Cliar Sheanchain* and local poets. These frequently ended in the defeat of the visitors... sixteen... descended on Clanranald in Nunton, Benbecula, demanding entertainment and hospitality, which in time extended to the chief's forty-second cow. Finally, in despair, Clanranald exclaimed in a characteristic style, 'O Iosa Criosda nan geur ghuin, agus a Mhoire Mhàthair an dubh bhròin! am bheil duin' idir idir ann an Clann-radhail

a thilleas air a'ghràisg dhaoine seo! ('Oh Thou Jesu Christ of the sharp wounds, and thou, Mary Mother of the black sorrow! is there no-one at all in Clanranald who can overcome those scurrilous kerns!') His prayer was answered when the satirists made the mistake of attacking his fool, who promptly defeated them.²⁶

Whilst the actual entry of the visitors to their host's land or home is not the ritual focus, there may be links between the bards' visiting rights and the marriage customs noted above. The rules of hospitality and fear of incurring the satirical attentions of the bards ensured that they were rarely refused. Breandán Ó Madagáin observes that the *ceol cáinte* or satirical song was 'a powerful sanction against non-conformance',²⁷ and WB Yeats speaks of "the extreme dread of being 'rhymed up' by some local maker of unkindly verses... no gift they demanded might be refused them... their rule was one of fear as much as love".²⁸ It is also important to note that a duty of hospitality may have been legally enforced; of early Irish law Fergus Kelly observes

the obligation to provide hospitality falls on all householders. To refuse food and shelter where it is due is to be guilty of the offence of *esáin* lit. 'driving away' (also termed *etech* 'refusal') and requires compensation... the house from which everybody is refused hospitality forfeits its *díre* i.e. the payment made in the event of its destruction.²⁹

There are limits to this rule; a householder could refuse 'on account of the smallness of his wealth' (unlikely in the context of a marriage) and criminals 'cannot be fed or protected'. Interestingly, a third party who causes a householder to indirectly refuse hospitality is guilty of this breach of law and 'must pay the honour-price of his embarrassed host'.³⁰ It may be that a bard resisting the entry of 'strangers' could thus be thought of as somehow acting 'independently' and blame directed away from the family, in the same way as the matchmaker who failed in his errand absorbs the shame of his charge, who denies all

knowledge of his intentions.

In such circumstances, the arrival of a bard representing the groom and asking for entry, or for an object or animal, or indeed for a father's daughter, may be seen in this context. As in the non-contest that is the bardic marriage exchange on the threshold, outright refusal is not an option; the groom's bard will prevail, he will enter, enjoy the hospitality of his adversaries and procure the object he requested. In the same way, the itinerant bards could not be refused entry or any request, no matter how difficult or onerous to meet. The duty of the householder to endeavour to meet the demands made of him has already been noted in connection with the tradition of 'thigging', and the bardic custom can be seen as a more concentrated and authoritative version of the same community norm, perhaps underpinned by law. As with the arrival of the *cliar sheanchain*, the groom's bard, as a representative of this privileged group, or the embodiment of its memory, could not be refused out of hand; he could, however, be challenged by a poet of equal status employed by the bride's family. The result would merely be a prolongation of entry, resulting in a certain degree of self-aggrandisement for the bards and the publicising of the honour of the families. The encounter itself, however, has its roots in the elaborate rules governing hospitality and the hierarchy of the bardic order.

d. Ritual entry and the 'stranger'

It would appear, however, that in normal circumstances entry to homes was informal. Trefor Owen observes

The visitor called out the usual question 'Are the people here?' and let themselves in. Easy access and hospitality went together: a visitor might stay three nights before being asked who he was. A place was set at the table for 'Morus Trawsfynydd' - 'Morris from over the mountain' - the unexpected guest... all the evidence suggests that in normal everyday experience, entry into the house was easy, informal and unrestricted.³¹

James Kirkwood (1650-1709) notes of the Highlanders 'they are generally very hospitable. Strangers may prevail among them gratis. When a stranger comes they direct him to an house which is design'd on purpose for that use, and they send him his Victuals plentifully'.³² One feels that such hospitality springs, as Yeats remarked, as much from fear as love, as well as by rule of law. There is some evidence to suggest that the arrival of a stranger was, however, specially marked. In Newfoundland, 'people walk into houses without warning'; the Christmas mummers, however, knock - a 'ritual by which they announce their strangeness'.³³ Although they formally announce their presence, entry could not be refused; they would 'move around freely, and sometimes even go to other parts of the house', and 'penetrate the inner part of the house'.³⁴ Visitors, it seems, were received in the kitchen, where the fire was located - to enter beyond this area required an explicit invitation. Knocking is done with the aid of a wooden baton, a 'split', and request for entry made 'in reverse speech' - that is, inhaling while speaking in order to conceal their identity. Similarly, in Bulgaria, the matchmakers knock at the window and thump their feet at the door to the house to 'show that they are no ordinary visitors'.³⁵ In many of the matchmaking and marriage visiting customs outlined above, the presence of the groom's representative is announced by striking a staff on the ground or on the door of the bride's home. It would appear the same rules applied as in the mumming tradition; although the householders could not legitimately refuse the representative entry, implying that he could

walk in unannounced if he wished, tradition demands he loudly announce his 'strangeness'. This can be achieved with the staff or even the rifle, as we have seen. Perhaps his 'otherness' is more accurate; the task of the matchmaker or representative is to effect entry for or on behalf of his charge. He represents the groom and embodies the male principle; assertive, vigorously active and dominating. His status, and the ceremonial seriousness it implies, demand that the matchmaker's preliminary visit, or that of the groom's party and representative be acknowledged as distinct from that of ordinary visitors. As to the disguising of voices, this was noted as a feature of the Welsh marriage *pwnco*, further suggesting a link between seasonal visiting customs and the decorum and ritual surrounding marriage tradition. The scrupulous expression of the equality of the two bards, the mock-contest, the gracious acknowledgment of defeat, is a symbol both of the equality of the two families and of the reciprocal aid and co-operation expected of the couple, their families and the community at large. As John Szwed observes of Newfoundland 'where all men are equal conceptually, the basis of their co-operation can only be reciprocal services: a voluntary reciprocity dictated by the mutual agreement of the parties... as opposed to the primary reciprocity of ranks'.³⁶ The bard, the bidder, the herald, the seeker for lost animals and the mummer all have the privilege of unrestricted entry. The mummer can roam around the house in the same way as the groom or representative may while looking for the 'hidden bride'; indeed, in one example given above the representative enters the girl's bedroom while she is still undressed.³⁷ During her period of transition, the bride is thought of as 'between owners', or 'not settled', as she was described above in a *rèiteach* from Harris. She may also be considered by the groom's side

as rightfully theirs, and therefore as 'lost property'. The groom's party's demand for the delivery and return of what is 'theirs' (an inversion of the true state of affairs) may procure the freedom to search beyond established boundaries, as enshrined in tradition. In the same way, the herald may tramp across ripe fields, a mediator between camps crossing no-man's land. The ritual figure who arrives to demand the bride can thus be seen as part of both the tradition of licence and mobility associated with a privileged bardic/heraldic order and with the relaxing or inversion of norms which prevail during seasonal visiting customs. This in turn suggests a link between seasonal and marriage custom, a theme which is further developed below. In Slovakia the 'strangers' at a wedding are the uninvited, who nevertheless bang on the door and demand three dances with the bride, as well as having the right to block the wedding procession and demand payment. Often masked, 'they threatened to do bad, if they were not offered something... singing a song that if they did not get it they would pull the fireplace down... when the uninvited guests were excluded from the wedding feast, the public opinion was against it and some groups claimed the entrance by force what ended up in a skirmish'.³⁸ Such behaviour is clearly linked with the roping and ransom-demanding customs noted earlier. Once again, although tradition ensures entry, a theatrical and very public knocking or banging accompanies the request.

III. 'One-way' and 'two-way' thresholds

We have noted the entrance to the home as being a 'two-way' threshold during the initial visit to the girl's family, when entry is demanded and effected and the groom's party leave, and during the 'fetching of the bride', a replaying of this earlier meeting when entry is again

made, and the bride taken away. The door, hinged and thus regulable, functions to control the admittance of strangers and as a boundary between inner and outer space. Ruth Richardson remarks that the grave is an example of a one-way threshold, and 'evidenced in the sense of outrage expressed by entire communities when bodysnatching was discovered'.³⁹ We can develop this idea further: the sexual act followed by birth can be seen as a two-way threshold; the 'journey' of the male seed leads in turn to the emergence of the child. Once born, the child cannot return to the womb; the two-way threshold becomes a boundary. Perhaps this is one explanation for the 'uncanniness' attributed to those who were born by what we term Caesarian section, those 'unborn' such as the priest in the riddle ballad *Captain Wedderburn's Courtship*.⁴⁰ Those born in this way have not completed the natural journey to the world of the living, snatched before their time while still in a state of limbo, emerging into the world between boundaries. This 'one-way' and 'two way' concept may be further developed and explored in relation to marriage ritual.

The 'delivering of the dowry', is 'one-way', since after customary resistance, the bride's goods are accepted and remain in the house. This ritual prefigures the arrival of the bride herself at her future home, where, after resistance by her mother-in-law, the bride enters and remains in the house. This replaying and prefiguring may be thought of as a magico-religious method of ensuring a positive and auspicious outcome for the rituals involving the bride herself. The goods, once accepted, may not be returned - to do so would risk robust social censure. In the same way, the bride may not leave her new home; once she has crossed the threshold to the groom's house, in some cases making public promises as to her future conduct as she does so, she 'belongs' with, if not to, her

husband's family. To leave would be an affront to the community and the institutions which underpin it. This can be taken further; when she does leave the house forever she will do so in a coffin, an inversion of the arrival of the marriage chest which no doubt contained her 'winding sheet' for this final journey.

This is also related to her taking leave of her family home; as we have seen, this is accompanied in many cultures by lamenting which, although perhaps in one sense the natural expression of regret and anticipated hardship, is also perceived ritually as the 'death of her old self'. Her departure is like a death in the family, a family member to be let go of with reluctance and sorrow, as if her bier were making its way over the threshold. This is also a one-way process because once she has publicly taken her leave she may not return; to do so would, again, violate a central taboo. There can be no return to her former life; she 'belongs' elsewhere, and through the adoption of a new identity (something again emphasised in ritual dialogue) she has become a new, 'unrecognisable' person. To return to her family, to leave her new home, for the groom's family to give back the dowry once accepted - these are as serious violations of customary law as the exhumation of a corpse. The key is *non-completion*, since this results in a return to an in-between state, the period of chaos and uncertainty which the rituals were intended to articulate and then resolve. The non-completion of the marriage rite cannot produce a return to a bachelor state any more than bodysnatching can deliver the corpse to the land of the living. For a bride to return to her father's house would be akin to returning from the dead; a privilege only allowed to wholly mythological wives. Her journey to the alien home is a journey to the other world; the door is closed; as she leaves, some brides' laments outline lack of support,

betrayal, the cruelty of the 'strangers', the long journey made by the groom's party and the great distance she will remain from her home. These journeys are through unregulated space, often the sea or forests, to a land far from familiar territory. In reality the voyage may be no further than the next village, if that far; Radost remarks 'regardless of the distance between the bridegroom's residence and the bride's the wedding makes a long journey'.⁴¹ The bride's transition to womanhood is perceived of as a road through unorganised space, that is, across water, or through forests or seas, and the transition must be expressed in terms of time taken as well as spatial passage. The length and complexity of the bride's journey from her father's house may be compared to the path taken by coffin-bearers; as with a wedding retinue, special rules applied as to preferred routes. One account explains that the returning mourners came 'by a different way to that by which the corpse was carried, in order to render it more difficult for the departed shade to return'.⁴² One purpose of the overt statement of the supposed vastness of the distance the bride must travel may be to emphasise the impossibility of her return. In the vast majority of cases the bride, one feels sure, may not actually be forbidden to return to visit, only to stay permanently. The bride's weeping *does* seem to indicate that she must at least pretend that she will not return and so reinforce the finality of her decision. The violation of taboos usurps the permanency of physical and symbolic boundaries, and the resultant chaos threatens the well-being of the whole community. Non-completion may also result from the discovery that the bride is not a virgin or failure on the part of the male to consummate the marriage. Aside from non-completion, perhaps the groom's crime is also to introduce ambiguity to the male-female polarity, overturning the sex-roles on which depends the

chief aim of the process - the creation of progeny. Even today, many cultures insist that a binding marriage depends on successful consummation, which may be considered the groom's side of the bargain.

The bride's is to offer a final boundary, the hymen, which must be overcome by the groom. The periodic breaching of customary law by 'penetrating the inner parts of the house' is analogous to the defloration of the bride. This identification may also lie behind the Austrian *Fensterstreite* ('window quarrels') noted above where a girl chants 'Go away from my window/ I am a fresh virgin/ I won't open for you./ Go away from my window/ If you were a real boy/ You would already be inside.' The repeated, persistent efforts by the male side to cross the threshold and enter controlled 'sacred' space, fiercely resisted by the bride's family, is thus a dramatic representation of the sex-act itself. This is but one of the essential elements for the process of marriage to reach completion, integral to the step-by-step advancement towards the creation of a new family. All the ritual steps must be fulfilled if cosmos is to be achieved.

We have noted that the marriage bidder enters and leaves, though the funeral bidder does not. The former is the bearer of good news, the embodiment of the future prosperity of the couple and by extension of the community. The marriage bidder resembles the seasonal guiser, bringing and depositing a 'positive charge' and then leaving - a two-way threshold. The funeral bidder, however, brings only sorrow. Perhaps there is a fear that his 'negative charge' would not leave with him, if admitted. He may be compared to the 'sin-eater', a composite of personal or community woe, a liminal, marginal, near-untouchable to be sent beggar-like on his way. It is perhaps of note that there is a

suggestion that funeral custom in Ireland featured a ritual dialogue; Ruth Richardson states:

In many districts, visiting mourners were greeted at the threshold of the house of death by the chief mourner, given a glass of alcohol (wine or ale) or a cup of tea, and a verbal greeting exchanged. In some places the greeting was as ritualized as the encounter; for example in Northern Ireland it took the form of the phrase: 'I'm sorry for your trouble'.⁴³

This suggestion of a threshold dialogue accompanied by drink as a method of incorporation is of interest. Whilst no evidence of ritual dialogue in marriage custom was found in Ireland for this study, its former existence, paralleling funeral custom, remains a strong possibility since on available evidence strong links exist between the structure and content of the two ritual events.

Lucy Mair reports that in rural Spain the suitor first walks with his girl in the promenade, then goes with her to the corner of the street, 'then finally commits himself by asking to enter the house'.⁴⁴ The present writer was assured that in rural Italian tradition, once a young man had crossed the threshold of his sweetheart's home he was obliged to marry her; indeed, the mother would encourage his entry, knowing that once crossed, community norms would ensure that a marriage would take place.⁴⁵ In these examples, the two-way threshold again becomes a one-way boundary. Perhaps this sheds further light on those customs of ritual entry detailed in previous chapters; once the groom's party cross the threshold a marriage will, indeed must follow.

The message is clear; once a ritual process is begun, it must be followed to its inexorable conclusion. Not to do so, whether in the course of baptism, marriage or burial, is a preface to disaster. Non-completion of rituals does not merely result in family shame,

feuding or material loss; nor is it an embarrassing inconvenience; it is no less than a threat to the belief system which underpins the entire order of the community itself.

It is clear that crossing the threshold of the house, and other boundaries and obstacles such as ropes and threads are correlated with the defloration of the bride, as well as representing the passage to a new state. The level of resistance expressed is in turn correlated with her modesty and chastity, and by extension the honour of her stock. Too much resistance, however, can result in censure. Describing the Northumberland custom of a new bride being lifted over the 'Petting Stick' which barred her exit from the church, one observer remarks,

The idea was that if the bride was cheerful and agreeable about this hindrance to her progress, and skipped over it with a good grace, the husband was to be regarded as a lucky man, whose partner's amiability was well calculated to make him happy. If, on the other hand, the bride pouted and hung back, or made a difficulty of observing the custom, the poor husband was to be commiserated on the possession of a shrew, whose ill-temper would probably make him smart in the future.⁴⁶

We may interpret this as a condemnation of celibacy rather than an indicator of 'amiability'. Refusal rites and mock resistance retard the progression of the ritual; this is expected, even demanded by the occasion. To protest too much, however, risks placing the whole process in jeopardy, raising the possibility of non-completion. The overly-reluctant bride is no longer 'playing the game', or keeping to the cultural script. Interestingly, this 'lifting' is also a feature of seasonal custom in Wales, occurring at Easter time.⁴⁷

Radost describes a Bulgarian ritual in which the bride enters her new home over the threshold, under her mother-in-law's straddled legs.⁴⁸ This also further indicates the identification of the house with the human body. The bride resists as she will later resist

the loss of her virginity; the earlier passage prefigures the later, and this forms a part of the complex pattern of prefiguring and 'replaying' we have noted throughout this study. The actions of the entire male retinue are reduced, through the onward progression of the ritual, to the single figures of the groom and his bride and the single action of her defloration.

Interestingly, Radost notes that entering the house through a woman's straddled legs could also be a feature of the groom's first visit to his mother-in-law's house, which can be seen as a 'replaying' of the earlier 'delivering the bride' ritual. Similarly, the Berber groom had to actually jump over his mother-in-law who was lying on the threshold in order to gain access to the room in which the bride was waiting.⁴⁹ Radost also describes how the bride also showed 'pretended fear' in being obliged to stir up the fire in her new home, before being dragged to other 'female spaces' in the house (for example the kneading trough) by the mother who had put a belt around her. In some districts a halter was placed around her and she was led three times around the fireplace.⁵⁰ The belt and halter are, of course, further examples of boundary lines which separate, delineate and control.

This ritual conception of one and two-way thresholds has implications for the verbal forms which accompany these customs. Dialogue is two-way, monologue one. Where there is a degree of, or pretence of, equality, dialogue occurs; it is when the two-way threshold has become a one-way boundary that monological forms are used to pronounce closure. Dialogue is the prerequisite for progression; once commenced, it possesses a momentum quite independent of the specificities of a particular context. No

matter the nature of the struggle, it is the *form* itself which indicates and symbolises the willingness to go on. As we have noted, this is in contrast to silence or monologic expression, where no such progress is sought, only ritual exclusion and 'non-being' or closure and a resulting one-way boundary.

In the betrothal rites, the contest in dialogue form is a dramatic presentation of the supposed equality of the two families. This ends with a monologic form, a blessing by the ceremonial figure who occupies the higher ritual position. In other words, the outcome of the agonistic encounter is the assertion of equilibrium. Similarly, in the delivering of the dowry, spirited exchange leads to another blessing and incorporation. In the 'delivering of the bride', the ritual silence she has kept during the process of the wedding has ended, and ritual dialogue between the bride and her mother-in-law signals the beginning of their new, co-operative, relationship. The dialogue is, however, very one-sided; one example above called for the bride simply to repeat her mother-in-law's words. The structure of the verbal forms parallel the ritual patterns; of temporary lack of equilibrium leading to stasis; contest and reconciliation, disharmony to harmony and chaos to cosmos. In this respect, verbal activity parallels ritual position and social status.

Ritual silence indicates more than mere humility, rather a temporary prohibition on communication which reflects a conception of those in transition as being apart, remote and in a liminal state of non-being due to the elimination of individuality. This is restored through the recovery of speech, as well as, for example, in the lifting of the veil. That the veil was a cipher for 'non-being' is further suggested by an account of a Dumfriesshire marriage custom in the nineteenth century:

In Scottish law, the subsequent marriage of the parents legitimizes any children born to them before the legal union... During the ceremony, performed... by a minister in the house of the bride, the child - a little girl - stood close beside her mother with her mother's apron over her head. The idea seems to have been that the father thus acknowledged and accepted paternity, *as if the child were still unborn*, but yet be born of the marriage.⁵¹ [my italics]

Radost recounts a case where a new priest broke this silence taboo, asking the bride directly if she consented to the marriage:

'Have they not forced you to marry him, etc.?' The bride kept silent. The villagers looked at each other and... one of the more influential among them said 'What are you doing, father? Don't you know that the bride does not speak now? Why do you ask her?'... The bride answered: 'Ask my father!' and the priest was reprimanded for having made the bride speak.⁵²

Thus the many-voiced, multiple motivations are reduced to the humble exchange between the individual in transition and the ritual expert, and at last to the final blessing which brings closure.

IV. The role of the matchmaker

We have noted a certain similarity in terms of structure and ritual conception of the roles performed by the matchmaker, bidder or other ritual figure, the baptismal official and the midwife. To this list we might add the keener and the 'mythical' ferry man; all non-kin ritual figures, often socially marginal, who perform the liminal task of accompanying and representing those in transition in or out of life. Such tasks, it would appear, were not to be effected by the relatives themselves. To be in a state of transition, it seems, is to be both in danger and a risk to others.

As we have seen, the matchmaker is typically highly mobile, due to profession or

special dispensation, and either socially marginal or perceived of as supra-normal, such as a poet. In a similar way, the task of the baptismal 'gossip', the midwife and the keener, and elsewhere the ferryman, is to accompany and facilitate the passage of the person in transition. They are mediators on two levels, the ritual and the actual; between two worlds, surmounting the basic oppositions and boundaries that confront the person in transition, and between two families, an arbiter negotiating actual conditions in 'real' time and space. Aside from verbal skill, the matchmaker-bard's freedom to cross ripe fields, and thus exempt from boundary rules, is an acknowledgement of his role as mediator between two potential rivals, as well as a mythical conception of his negotiating transit between 'this' and 'the next' world. The image of the flowering fields may be a reference to the Spring time of plenty which, as we have noted, also signalled the arrival of a period of rivalry and mutual distrust when boundaries were intensified. The mediator's freedom of movement is in stark contrast to the prohibition which applies to those in transition; the two lie at opposite ends of an axis of spatial movement. The matchmaker overcomes this opposition; for the bride and groom, movement to a new state is effected, even if they themselves are hidden, silent or absent. The sanctioned passage across the fields is again analogous to a death custom; Ruth Richardson describes designated unploughed paths, 'bier balks' used for the transportation of the dead. A desire to ensure the easy passage of the dead resulted in a 'right of way' applying to a coffin bearing those who had died in an outlying district; 'the needs of the dead and their bearers were accorded special respect... needs which were popularly held to override any legalistic understanding of boundaries and land ownership'.⁵³ In other words, customary norms were able to be overridden by

common consent for magico-religious reasons, just as marriage or seasonal customs affect rules of entry and hospitality. It may be that fields, regardless of ownership, were also regarded as 'unorganised space' across which those in transition *had* to cross, rather than simply *could* cross.

The matchmaker embodies the potential for creation; he is the 'maker' of the next generation in that he prefigures the groom's defloration of the bride. By crossing the threshold to her home, a sanctioned entry to sacred, guarded, 'inner' space, he enables the process that will lead to progeny to begin. The choice of a poet or at least one the community acknowledges as verbally skilled is of interest; one could argue that local knowledge and mobility are more immediately useful skills. The explanation may lie in the ritual conception of language, of creating nature in linguistic form. In many cultures the maker of metaphors is seen as performing a mystical feat, recalling the 'first creator' in uniting the individual with the universal. Metaphor reorganises the way language maps the world, and the identification and unification of a 'like' with a formerly 'unlike' shares a structural relationship with marriage. Through metaphor, domains which language usually keeps separate are momentarily brought together, and new meanings brought into existence. The poet-matchmaker, in bringing together the formerly separate, is a mediating creator, responsible for bringing about union from diversity, the establishment of a new family and the reshaping of the community. His re-ordering produces a temporary breakdown of the polarities either/or as the groom and bride undergo transition. At the same time, the polarities male/female are simultaneously in flux as he is involved in both 'camps', carrying both male and female charge. For this reason it is necessary that he is

himself an unrelated, liminal figure, capable of occupying varying positions between these polarities. He neither belongs nor does not belong to the community; he is not absolutely identified with one side or the other, as the 'non-contest' he takes part in illustrates; he does not want to win, but to create forward movement which benefits both parties and indeed the whole community. Whether there is one matchmaker between the two families, or one, or two for each, despite their outward assertions there is never absolute identification with one camp. The whole process is concerned with the resolution of opposites and the obtaining of harmony; for this reason each matchmaker must embody the concept of 'neither one nor the other' presiding over the temporary period of disharmony in order to bring about its resolution.

We have also noted that the matchmaker would also appear to embody the opposites of 'comic and serious'; as we have seen, the discourse of those involved in bringing about union is characterised as much by jokes and teasing as ceremonial seriousness and seemingly gravity, and we recall that the aura surrounding the proceedings in Bulgaria was described by Radost as 'both merry and grave'. In the Harris *rèiteach* recorded by Morag MacLeod, one side have all the jokes and temporarily arrest forward movement; the other side play the 'straight men' and press on. One Breton bard teases his adversary about his appearance, the other keeps to the matter in hand, repeatedly requesting entry. In both examples, it is the bride's family, temporarily in a 'superior', 'upper' position, who are the laughter-makers, and who frustrate the progression and dignity of the proceedings. In connection with the Bulgarian *starisvat*, Radost remarks that he possesses 'opposite traits - of a serious attitude to the rites and of their parody like

reinterpretation... authority and dignity... and a source of laughter'.⁵⁴ Perhaps the comic character of the bride's representatives represents not only a willingness to bring humour to the occasion and produce ritual resistance, but is indeed a 'parody like reinterpretation' and thus a formal, structural element rather than merely a humorous diversion. This synthesis of the lofty and the low, of the serious and comic principles was memorably interpreted by Bakhtin in his seminal study of Rabelais, in which he states

Praise and abuse are, so to speak, the two sides of the same coin. If the right side is praise, the wrong side is abuse, and vice-versa. Though divided in form they belong to the same body, or to the two bodies in one, which abuses while praising and praises while abusing... particularly in its oldest form [this language] was oriented toward the world and all the world's phenomena in their condition of unfinished metamorphosis: the passing from night to morning, from winter to spring, from the old to the new, from birth to death... it is based on the conception of the world as eternally unfinished: a world dying and being born at the same time, possessing as it were two bodies. The dual image combining praise and abuse seeks to grasp the very moment of this change, the transfer of the old to the new, from death to life. Although the combination of praise and abuse is completely alien to official genres, it is characteristic of folk culture.⁵⁵

Indeed, Bakhtin states that much of the fourth book of Pantagruel, where Pantagruel visits the island of the Catchpoles, is drawn from 'images from the living popular-festive tradition of his [Rabelais'] time'. One finds a mock-wedding, where the visitor is thrashed then praised, to be based on 'the custom of the so-called *noces à mitaines* ('gauntlet weddings') a custom found 'in Poitiers and other French provinces' where during the wedding feast

the guests cuffed each other jokingly. The person who was subjected to these light blows could not complain; they were consecrated and legalised by custom... [it] is a carnival rite, linked with fertility, with procreative force... thrashing is as ambivalent as abuse changed into praise. There is no pure abstract negation in the popular-festive system of images; it tends

to embrace both poles of becoming in their contradiction and unity. The one who is thrashed or slaughtered is decorated. The beating itself has a gay character; it is introduced and concluded with laughter.⁵⁶

Bakhtin's remarks on ritual laughter bring to mind the observations of Johan Huizinga on the relationship between 'play' and ritual. His analysis, although now almost fifty years old, is startlingly perceptive, and worth quoting at length.

Play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own... The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is always being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. Play turns to seriousness and seriousness turns to play... Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration... it is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning. Play begins, and then at a certain moment is 'over'. It plays itself to an end. While it is in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation... More striking even than the limitation as to time is the limitation as to space. All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground... [they] are all in form and function... forbidden spots, isolated, hedged around, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart... Play... creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection... The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt... as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over. The umpire's whistle breaks the spell and sets 'real' life going again.⁵⁷

In both the game and the ritual contest, order is created from the resolution of an agonistic activity on a 'consecrated spot', whether threshold or playing field. In the marriage ritual, conflicts and difference, whether real or imagined, profane or sacred, between the families, the seasons, the sexes, are 'acted out'. This dramatised chaos is a conscious model adopted in order to secure a positive outcome for all concerned. Aside from the necessity of its

taking place on a boundary, whether spatial or temporal, it must last a certain *time*. The 'holding up' of progression by the bride's representatives, whether in words or through obstacles in the physical world is more than seemingly 'resistance'; it is a ritual necessity. There must be gradual progression through space and time; an acknowledgement of difficulty; an assertion of notional equality; a contest must take place, even though all participants know the outcome is fixed. The journey must be like a 'real' journey, the contest like a 'real' contest; to deny this, to press on with undue haste, would result, as Huizinga puts it, in the collapsing of the 'play-world', the non-completion of the cultural 'script'. In times of flux and uncertainty, imaginative actualisations articulate the forces of change, and the order of nature is 'played out'. This must be done; there will be time enough to return to the harsh, repetitive regime of the common world.

Bakhtin's conception of the 'unfinished metamorphosis... in the very moment of change' is helpful in explaining both the simultaneous presence of praise and dispraise in the discourse of those central to the marriage ritual and for other liminal features. The opposites 'chaos' and 'cosmos' are correlated with 'low' and 'high' and 'female' and 'male'; the fact that the matchmakers embody both helps diminish these polarities and emphasise the 'ambivalence' Bakhtin refers to. Thus the ritual dialogue between the male and female principles serves to stress the unity of the sexes, despite the fixed outcome of the contest, in which the 'winner' loses and the 'loser' carries off the prize.

For those participating in the rite, they are indeed 'dying and being born at the same time', possessing if not two bodies, then two identities. The usual norms of social relations are in flux and the couple are associated with two social groups, yet belong to

neither absolutely. The same could be ventured for their sexuality, which, in their isolation, silence, and prohibition of free association with their peers, tends toward androgyny. This is a 'low' which is resolved to 'high' as they reject bachelordom in favour of the marriage bed. We can see this in rites involving cross-dressing and in role-reversal marriage customs such as the Germanic *polterabend*, where the male sweeps up crockery smashed by guests, again stressing the unity of the sexes, as well as the more obvious symbolism of marriage as joint work.

This androgyny must also apply to some extent to the representatives themselves, since, in Celtic society at least, these are exclusively male. The bride's family enlist a man embodying the female principal, and perhaps this is one explanation for the ubiquity of tailors. As we have seen, there is more than a suggestion that as a group they were marginal and misprized, perhaps due to their frequent contact with women. Perhaps their status was one of 'womanish man', not wholly incorporated in either group, and so ideal for this particular ritual role, quite aside from their mobility. There may also be a symbolic understanding of their craft as 'creative', producing, in a sense, order from disorder, through the astute selection of 'raw materials' and their careful stitching and sewing into something recognisably whole.

The ambivalent state between being and non-being is also evident in the fact that those in transition, if present, are ritually 'invisible' and 'inaudible'; both 'here' and 'not here'. In the same way, the 'journeys' undertaken by them take place in real time and space, although their actions are also conceived of as existing and taking place on a ritual level, in 'sacred' time. The community itself is, of course, in a continuous state of death and

renewal.

The matchmaker also unites the opposites of past and present. Great emphasis is placed on rites indicating the rejection of a prior bachelor state and the company of the young and incorporation with the mature, 'older' group of married people. This movement is not just upward in the social hierarchy, but forward in time, as overnight the couple become part of the group responsible for bringing forward the next generation and no longer part of that generation themselves.

V. Conclusion

We may conclude that the various entry rites which delineate the different stages of the marriage ritual are part of a highly complex network of entry and exit rituals which pertain to 'life crises' as well as seasonal custom and games, and territorial and property law. When 'profane time' is in operation, normal vigilance of boundaries obtains. When 'sacred time' occurs, between two periods of profane time, these boundaries may be ignored or inverted, with new, temporary rules applying to established borderlines such as the threshold of the house. As we have seen, this suspension of borderlines is also manifest in the shifting positions or identities of members of the community. In the marriage ritual, family members are all moving 'up' the scale. At these times participants and non-participants become for a time 'unrecognisable'. Neighbours may be 'strangers', whether disguised as the returning dead or not. In addition, the community sanctions the suspension of normal boundary rules during other potentially disruptive, highly-charged circumstances, such as theft or property dispute. Boundaries are also penetrable as a result

of losing a contest in verse, such as the arrival of a challenger to the Welsh household bard, or its inversion, the exit of the *cliar sheanchain*. The marriage ritual and the dialogues which accompany it would appear to some extent to parody these entry rituals; the adoption of a fixed outcome contest as a pretext for entry is a case in point. We have also noted that the pattern of challenge and reply, the contractual function, the role of passive participants and the competing for 'honour' are also reminiscent not only of seasonal custom but of the agonistic verbal encounters associated with traditional epics. In these, rival heroes exchange insults and boasts which carry significance comparable to actual physical encounters. In all contexts - life crisis, seasonal and martial - there is an interplay between quarrel and collaboration. The two heroes' formalised, public single combat is, as the matchmakers', simultaneously personal and collective, and we have already noted the boasting elements of the speech of the *bazvalan* as suggesting a relationship between these contexts. These various contests take place in a highly complex social and magico-religious setting, one which Huizinga describes as 'that primitive sphere of continuous and eager contest where play and combat, justice, fate, and chance are intimately commingled'.⁵⁸ Dialogue expresses polarities of viewpoint more effectively than a monologic form such as a speech or boast; these are reserved for when the world is no longer in flux and the period of chaos ended by a 'one-way' speech and reinforced by symbolic action and actual incorporation.

Two-way thresholds become boundaries; the period for freedom of movement or passage gives way to the creation of borderlines for which new rules apply. As in the territorial ritual of the *tellach* the repeated crossing and returning over the boundaries of

the land in dispute, perhaps over the sacred ground occupied by tutelary spirits, followed by the occupation of the more sacred 'internal' space, results in the creation of a fixed borderline now perceived of as one-way, no longer 'penetrable' by outside influence. The bride is fought over as is the threshold of her home or the room in which she is secluded; these are perceived of as 'penetrable' for a special period through ritual sanction, as any home may be entered under the licence obtaining during seasonal festivals. Her virginity and home, once conceived of as impregnable now may be overwhelmed, creating new boundaries. As with seasonal rites, once the liminal period is over, the borderlines are enforced again, with the same customary zeal that drives villagers to march the perimeter of their territory at those times when an ambiguity with regard to ownership is perceived to exist. In the marriage ritual, various ambiguities are enacted and resolved; of ownership as with the *tellach*, of sexuality in the bachelor/non-bachelor, virgin/non-virgin tension, of belonging and not belonging, of alien and 'of ourselves'. The gradual progression towards the creation of final borderlines is evident in the steady accretion of personal responsibility and community involvement. The three-part movement towards the *banais* makes backing out of the process increasingly unlikely. When the wider community are called upon as witnesses in a marriage ritual the new order is set in stone. Community confidence was such that, as we have seen, the young couple were permitted to consummate their union before official Christian blessing. Similarly, each challenging forward movement of the *tellach*, meeting no resistance, makes the final outcome of possession increasingly likely. Once new hierarchy and ownership are established, the re-defined boundaries are universally accepted and maintained with a vigilance of customary law which approaches

the sacred. Such is their perceived permanency, they can no more be revoked than could a new-born return to the womb, nor a married woman regain her virginity.

Notes

1. Arnold van Gennep, The Rites of Passage trans. Vizedom and Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) 134, 15.
2. Radost 84
3. Lucy Mair, Marriage 107.
4. Murdo Ewen MacDonald, Harris. SA1996.97. Recorded by the author.
5. MacBain, 'Highland Superstitions', Scoto-Celtic Studies 2 n.d.: 21.
6. Ruth Richardson, 'Death's Door' Boundaries and Thresholds 94
7. This occurred in the example from the Dewar MS.
8. See, for example, Radost 52. In Bulgaria, all wedding parties were obliged to cross water, and the location of churches near bridges is evidence of the persistence of this custom.
9. The Rites of Passage 19
10. 'Eadar a' rèiteach 's a phòsadh'. Informant: Rev. Norman MacDonald. Collector: James Ross. SA 1957/97.A7. I am grateful to Peggy MacClements for her transcription and translation of this tale.
11. Owen, 'The Ritual Entry to the House in Wales' 339. For examples of smooching charms, see Carmina Gadelica 297-8.
12. Owen, op.cit. 339.
13. David Greene and E.G. Quin, Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language - T-tnúthaigid (The Royal Irish Academy, Dublin: Hodges and Figgis, London: Williams and Norgate, 1943) 140-41.
14. Fergus Kelly, A Guide to Early Irish Law (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988) 186-7.
15. T.M. Charles-Edwards, Early Irish and Welsh Kinship (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 259-73.

16.Kelly 187.

17.Charles-Edwards 260.

18.For further details on territorial law in Ireland see Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages; 'The customs of land-tenure and ownership in Ireland must have varied, not only between one area and another, but also often between one clan and another within the same area, for it is obvious that an arrangement which had been followed by a particular family over some generations would come to have the force of custom and thus of law. (57)

19.A.J. Youngson, ed. Beyond the Highland Line: Three Journals of Travel in Eighteenth Century Scotland (London: Collins, 1974) 202.

20.Peter G.B. MacNeill, ed., The Practicks of Sir James Balfour of Pittendreich (1754) 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Stair Society, Glasgow UP, 1963) 2: 522, 525.

21.Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages 55

22.Jenny Wormald, 'The Blood Feud in Early Modern Scotland' in John Bossy, ed., Disputes and Settlements (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1983) 112-13.

23.Katherine F. Drew, Law and Society in Early Medieval Europe (London: Variorum, 1988) 41, n.93.

24.J.L. Campbell, Collection 55.

25.Campbell 55, editor's note.

26.John Shaw, 'Scottish Gaelic Traditions of the *Cliar Sheanchain*' Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples 146. Quoting from Carmichael, Carmina Gadelica.

27.Breandán Ó Madagáin, 'Functions of Irish Song' Béaloideas 53 (1985) 177.

28.W.B. Yeats, 'Bardic Ireland', Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth (London: Penguin, 1993) 51.

29.Kelly 139.

30.Kelly 140.

31.Trefor Owen, 'The Ritual Entry to the House in Wales' 340.

32.Campbell 45.

33. Herbert Halpert and G.M. Story, eds. Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1969) 69-70.
34. Halpert 113
35. Radost 65.
36. John F. Szwed, 'The Mask of Friendship' Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland 107. Quoting J.A. Pitt-Rivers, The People of the Sierra, 137.
37. From The Dewar Manuscripts, previously cited.
38. Kornélia Jakubíková, 'The Participation of the Local Community in the Wedding in Slovakia' Ethnologia Slavica 18 (1986) 15-22.
39. Ruth Richardson, 'Death's Door', Boundaries and Thresholds 100.
40. Among the conditions Captain Wedderburn must satisfy is the production of a 'priest unborn'. This he does, since of the individual outside the door 'No one can say that he was born, no one unless he sin/ A wound cut in his mother's side and he oot at it did fa'. Greig Duncan Collection 286.
41. Radost 79
42. Richardson, quoting Bertram Puckle Boundaries and Thresholds 98
43. Richardson 94
44. Mair 92.
45. Personal communication from Dr. Alba Cosma, Bari, Italy.
46. W. Crooke, 'The Lifting of the Bride', Folklore 13 (1902): 230.
47. Roberts, Cambrian Popular Antiquities, 125.
48. Radost 79-80
49. Edmond Destaing, Etude sur la dialecte berbère des Beni-Snous (Paris: Leroux, 1907) I: 287-91. Quoted in Rites of Passage 126.
50. Radost 74
51. A.G. Gilchrist, 'A Curious Scottish Marriage Custom', Folklore 49 (1938): 192-3.

52.Radost 52

53.'Death's Door' Boundaries and Thresholds 98.

54.Radost 91

55.Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge and London: MIT P, 1968) 165-66.

56.Bakhtin 200, 203.

57.Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949, reprinted 1980) 7-11.

58.Huizinga 100

Chapter Seven

Rèiteach and the Evil Eye

I. Introduction

Only one of the dialogue examples collected for this study contains a direct reference to the concept of the evil eye; the account is from Harris, and concerns the availability of a 'hog' tainted in this way, and we have interpreted the introduction of this topic as being related to lactation and milk produce generally. Closer examination of other evidence suggests that traditions surrounding a fear of the evil eye play a role in many, if not all the examples found. The impact of this anxiety is not confined to milk production, and the evil eye may be said to inform the ritual exchanges in the following areas:

- a. threats relating to milk and other fluids
- b. praise and dispraise
- c. buying and selling
- d. thigging
- e. concealment, distraction and silence

We may now examine these in more detail.

II. The evil eye and ritual exchanges

a. Threats relating to milk and other fluids

The impact of the evil eye on lactation and the production of milk products such as butter, as well as crops and other products is well-documented and widespread. In Alan Dundes Casebook, for example, one can find references to the topic of milk produce and the evil eye from Hungary, Ukraine, Macedonia, Slovakia, Greece, Sweden, Spain, Lebanon and Islamic and Hindu cultures generally, as well as from Scotland and Ireland.¹ In a cross-cultural survey, John M. Roberts found the highest correlation with milking and dairy production, and the highest incidence with the presence of bovine species.² The oral quality of the evil eye, 'devouring with the eyes' is evident; the act of looking too intensely, or the mere glance of an ill-favoured person is equivalent to the removal, redistribution or incorporation of the milk and the animal's future capacity for production. In the case of butter-theft, the potential for the fluid to become solid is removed - in other words, the evil eye results in the milk remaining at the liquid stage. In his Evil Eye in the Western Highlands, R.C. MacLagan notes also butter becoming 'a kind of grainy substance', a mother's milk turned into water, and cows in addition to giving no milk 'running and roaring like mad'.³ Henderson, in his Survivals, gives a variety of charms and countermeasures for the return of the *toradh*, or milk produce, and several such charms are to be found in Carmichael's Carmina Gadelica.⁴ In this context, we may re-examine the Harris *rèiteach* exchange collected by Morag MacLeod.

The bride's father asserts that he has lost a lot of stock and retains only a 'dry ewe'. This most obviously is a reference to a woman past child-bearing age; it could, however, be a reference to the bride herself. This interpretation is suggested as a result of his next remark, which is that he has a hog for sale, but one *tainted by the evil eye*; the animal is

prone to wandering, unsettled, but could be 'cured' by the 'sale' to the groom's party. He then refers to a 'dry sheep' that is for sale, an animal which, however, 'would not always be dry', again suggesting that the remedy for the 'dryness' is for the transfer of 'ownership' of the girl to take place. We have previously noted that reference is made by the speaker to a common cure for the evil eye, that of 'silvered water'. The girl is unsettled and prone to wandering, just as the animals are 'running and roaring' in MacLagan's account. She is also temporarily 'dry', another consequence of the evil eye. This is not to suggest that the participants in this *rèiteach* believe in such bewitching; the girl may be 'dry' because she is not suckling, and this is the situation which can be 'cured' by marriage. The subtext of this may be, however, the quoting in a parodic spirit of an anxiety which was formerly widely held; the belief that the evil eye would affect fertility and result in the diminishing of the woman's or animal's capacity to produce milk. They may still 'believe in the old things'. We have noted above the structural similarity with the rites of milk stealing and those of 'stealing' the goodness of the house in the form of the bride. Indeed, a section of MacLagan's study is entitled 'Giving Away Milk Dangerous', and details how, once a person with the evil eye has been given milk, the remainder of the milk will be spoiled and the cow injured.⁵ Gregor notes of the North-East of Scotland,

When one entered the house during the process of churning, the hand of the one who entered had to be put to the churn. This was done to show that there was no evil intended against the butter-making, and to do away with all effects that might flow from the 'ill-e'e' or the 'ill-fit'. There were persons whose entrance was dreaded during the process of butter-making. If such did enter there was either no butter, or it was bad in quality, or less in quality than it should have been.⁶

This may be a further indication that the groom's party are linked, however seriously meant, with those who would steal the *toradh* of the house. Their entrance meets with the same resistance which would also accompany those wishing to enter during a 'sensitive' time such as butter-making. Those who lacked a productive animal of their own were particularly suspected; an informant of MacLagan's reports

The butter was taken from myself last year. We churned until Ronald and Donald and myself were running with sweat, but although we had continued at it till now we could not get a bit of butter. It is in the barn that we gather the milk, and a man who has not got a cow of his own came the way one day and he looked on the milk in the barn, and we were making out that it was he who had done the harm. The friends were advising me not to be allowing people to see the milk, but that I should remember that every person is not like myself. Well, from that time we are taking care that nobody will get an opportunity to go where the milk is, and now we are getting as much butter as we ought to get in every churning.⁷

This not only recalls the girl's family's reluctance to let the stranger enter, the 'buyers' looking for a beast to purchase, but may also provide an explanation as to why the bride was hidden. As long as she remains secluded from sight, she is safe from the effects of the evil eye. The connection between milk, the evil eye, and animal and human fertility is further suggested in this fragment of a charm from *Carmina Gadelica* against bewitching:

The kindly Colum directing me,
The holy Oran protecting me,
Whilst Bride of women beneficent
Shall put fruitage in the kine.

As the King of kings ordained,
To put milk in breast and gland,
As the Being of life ordained,
To put sap in udder and teat.

In udder of badger,
In udder of reindeer,

In udder of sow,
In udder of mare.

In udder of sow,
In udder of heifer,
In udder of goat, ewe, and sheep,
Of roe, and of cow.

With milk, with cream, with substance,
With rutting, with begetting, with fruitfulness,
With female calves excelling,
With progeny, with joyance, with blessing.

Without man of evil wish,
Without woman of evil eye,
Without malice, without envy,
Without one evil.⁸

That brides and bridegrooms were particularly at risk from the evil eye is mentioned by several commentators on other Indo-European and Semitic cultures. At a Hindu wedding in South India, the couple, sitting opposite one another, show each other, and then drop, salt, chillis and cakes. This is done because 'on account of their attractive appearance, and being the central figures in the ceremony, they are the subjects of the gaze of everybody, and particularly susceptible to the bad influence of the evil eye.' The rite is intended to 'avert any calamity from this source'.⁹ We will recall the figure of the *strashnik* in Bulgarian tradition, whose inside-out, upside down appearance 'attracted the gaze of all present, and in this way warded off possible evil spells against the... girl'.¹⁰ In the Jewish tradition 'the new-born baby is apt to be influenced by the evil eye and should, therefore, not be shown to strangers. The bride is exposed to the danger of the evil eye and should, therefore, be veiled during the wedding ceremony'.¹¹ This last reference further suggests a common link between the rituals surrounding infants entering human society for the first

time, and the marriage couple who are undergoing a social 'rebirth'. MacLagan also details the importance of hiding new-borns from sight.¹² Whilst brides affected by the evil eye may lose their fecundity and so their ability to produce milk, grooms were also at risk from malign influence which could affect their potency. The following account is from Greece, collected in the early 1970s;

Although [the couple] had carried such such prophylactics as blue against the evil eye... it was obvious to the villagers that the couple had been bewitched during the marriage service. The groom was unable to consummate the marriage... in a society where the wedding sheets are publicly displayed, this became a well-known fact. The groom took ill and was bedridden for four months. He began to waste away...¹³

As the bride 'dries up', so does the groom, whose equivalent milk-like product is also under threat of removal, as his impotence results in non-production. We may compare this to MacLagan's descriptions of the inability of a liquid to become solid, and of a solid becoming 'grainy', a condition which occurs again through a lack of liquid. This connection of the breasts and male genitals is further suggested in the charms of the Greek villagers in the above account, where evil is returned to the possessor of the evil eye with 'if it is a woman crush her breasts and if it is a man crush his genitals'.¹⁴ A charm from *Carmina Gadelica* against the evil eye calls for a redirection of the malign influence in a similar way: 'May it lie on their potent men,/ May it lie on their pregnant women,/ May it lie on their virile sons,/ May it lie on their conceptive daughters.'¹⁵ Another urges 'If it be eye of man,/ May it flare like pitch,/ If it be eye of woman,/ May she want her breast.'¹⁶ Alan Dundes notes phallic gestures such as the *fica* used to ward off the evil eye, and the practice of males touching their genitals 'upon seeing a priest or other individual thought to have the evil eye... it is not unreasonable to assume that the evil eye threatened to make

men impotent... the evil eye is as dangerous to female breasts (including cow's udders) as to male genitals... in symbolic terms, a pair of eyes may be equivalent to breasts or testicles.¹⁷ Dundes develops this 'wet and dry' theory to assert that 'wet' equals life and 'dry' death, and that

if one individual possesses a precious body fluid, semen, for instance, this automatically means that some other individual lacks that same fluid. Life entails an equilibrium model. If one has too little wealth, one is poor or ill. Such individuals constitute threats to persons with sufficient or abundant wealth and health.¹⁸

Dundes cites further evidence to suggest that the conception of the diminishing of the life force as the gradual loss of liquid 'probably made sense in light of what was empirically observable in the case of fruits, among other items' and the magic liquids which revive the thirsty dead.¹⁹ In this connection, perhaps the imbibing of 'silver water' is intended to counter the dessicating influence of the evil eye, and we may compare this with other liquid preventative measures such as saliva and urine.

We may conclude that there is a further suggestion that arrival of the groom's party is linked with the evil eye and the stealing of the *toradh*, analogous to the milk-stealing rites of May and the preventative measures taken to protect the fertile, wealth-giving members of the household. In this respect the bride in Highland tradition is clearly linked with the 'milk producing' higher mammals, a link not found in the Breton tradition which, by contrast, portrays the bride as a bird.

b. Praise and dispraise

During the ritual element we have termed the 'refusal sequence', the groom's

representative is obliged to turn down the women presented to him before finally accepting the bride. In the Breton tradition, the rejection takes the form of qualified praise; each woman or girl is admirable and laudable, but in possession of qualities quite distinct from, but not inferior to those of the bride. In the examples from the Highland tradition, whether allegorical or non-allegorical, the women are refused through a certain degree of dispraise. As 'animals' they may be unsuitable for transplantation or difficult to winter; as 'women' their hands are too small or they are too lazy or fat. In both traditions the ritual concludes with high praise of the bride.

This may appear quite straightforward; the verbal skill of the groom's representative is tested through his being obliged to refuse female relatives and friends in an entertaining way, without causing offence; it is appropriate that an assertion of the bride's superior qualities should precede her 'handing over'. Praise of the bride, is, however, also linked to the evil eye complex. Eugene S. MacCartney in his essay 'Praise and Dispraise in Folklore' finds the link among the ancient Greeks and Roman cultures, besides more contemporary Mediterranean countries, Egypt, Scotland, Ireland, India, Malaya and among the Jewish community in Germany. Of traditional Gaelic society John Shaw observes

both praise and dispraise subsume dual aspects according to the intention, positive or otherwise, of the speaker or bard. The presence/absence of benevolence opens up a level where the magico-religious effects of speech come into play and are duly reflected in the vocabulary.²⁰

In particular, the word *aibhseachadh* (making a loud report, exaggerating) 'has the more specialised meaning of 'overpraising' ('praising up' in Cape Breton English)' and 'would often be resorted to when a fine animal excited envy, and the result of the exaggerated

praise was to bring the force of the evil eye (*droch shùil*) on the animal'.²¹

Walter Gregor, writing of the North East of Scotland, describes the vice of 'forespeaking':

praise beyond measure; praise accompanied with a kind of amazement or envy was followed by disease or accident... it was not deemed proper to bestow a great deal of praise on a child; and doing so would have been interrupted by some such words as 'Gueede sake, haud yir tung, or ye'll forespyke the bairn'. Such a notion of forespeaking by bestowing excessive praise was not limited to infants, but extended to full-grown people, to domestic animals, and to crops'.²²

Gregor details the woes that follow over-praising. MacLagan, in his study of the evil eye in the Highlands, gives many such examples, including a description of its effect on a woman:

An Islay man said: 'My late wife had a sister, and she was as pretty as you ever saw. Once a woman came in and commenced praising the girl excessively. Well scarcely was that woman gone out of the house when the girl began to yawn, and it was not long till she was so bad that they thought that she would be away' (die).²³

Whilst the effects of overpraise could be dire, any degree of praise was unwise; MacLagan remarks, 'the mere expression of admiration should be avoided by those who wish to escape the accusation of the Evil Eye'.²⁴ If an object was praised by another it was, to some degree, 'tainted' and had to be removed from the house if the malign influence was not to linger. MacLagan relates the story of a confrontation between two neighbours, one credited with the evil eye which had killed a third neighbour's chickens:

another neighbour came in carrying a growing plant, which she presented to the complainer, saying: 'Mrs. X. told me that you had your eye on this, and ever since it has done no good; the leaves have been withering and falling off. Now! - there it is to you! keep it'.²⁵

In the context of courtship and marriage, the expression of praise becomes especially problematic, since one may reasonably assume a positive, flattering, complimentary mode to be the one most appropriate and natural for the suitor or his representative, whether this is directed towards the girl or her family. Given that this is effectively forbidden, to freely indulge in praise of the bride at the conclusion of the betrothal rite is, in effect, to cast the evil eye upon her.

The bride is brought forward and explicitly praised; the result is that she can no longer remain under her father's roof, since she is now 'tainted' by their 'unwelcome' attentions. The eye is 'in' her; and him that put it there is not to be refused. Although dispraise could also be a method of hexing through the evil eye,²⁶ the women who are rejected, although criticised, are not desired. It would appear, therefore, that it is the notion of explicit praise in order to bring about the giving or selling of the object desired that is in operation, whether in a spirit of parody or in earnest.

Three methods to neutralise the harmful effects of praise are described by MacLagan. One is to immediately dispraise the object concerned, another to praise it even more highly, and the third to bless it when praised.²⁷ From the available evidence, in no example collected does the bride's father or representative attempt to undo or reverse the effect that praise of his daughter will undoubtedly bring. If there is a blessing, it is one which unites the couple. Praise could be countered with dispraise or exaggeration; this one can identify as a ritual dialogic form, and one which could be integrated in the ritual dialogues described above. The absence of this verbal form indicates that once the bride appears, the time for ritual combat is over. The father's failure to counter the praise of his

daughter confirms that he *wishes* it to happen, again, whether ^{this} is expressed in a spirit of play or not. Once she is praised, she must leave with the groom's party, a process that was set in motion as soon as they crossed the threshold, and perhaps from the day that she was admired by the groom himself.

That as a general rule direct praise was to be avoided is clear; yet the ritual exchanges from Barra and South Uist outlined above are plainly eulogies - a direct praising of the couple by their respective representatives. MacLagan gives several examples of the need to avoid praising one's own stock,²⁸ and although he does not mention these areas in particular, it seems unlikely that the traditions of the evil eye did not operate there in any form. One explanation may be that the rules governing praise were suspended for the period during which the two families had by necessity to form and cement the bonds between the couple and their families. The good qualities of each had to be articulated - this would be especially important if the families were relative strangers and had had no advance information from third parties. Indeed, one account from South Uist described above details the potential for just such a 'surprise attack'.²⁹ Although the author does not deal specifically with the subject of praise, an account of a temporary cessation of its prohibition appears to be suggested by a commentator on Greek tradition; commenting on the evil eye, Regina Dionisopoulos states:

The village secretary once told us how difficult it was to levy taxes or take a census, as the people maintained they had nothing. Their lands were poor and few, their animals were diseased, old and dying, their health was so bad they were unable to work regularly. But when a peasant farmer is trying to impress another about the qualities of his children in regard to a possible marriage, he cannot praise his health and wealth enough. While the peasant's attitude may appear to be incongruous, there is an explanation. Concern about assessments and fears about evoking the evil

eye are reasons for not bragging about one's wealth and health. However, when the issue is a match, modesty is out. This, of course, makes the potential couple an object of envy, since the dowry is in order and since they are considered to be desirable.³⁰

The author goes on to describe the various methods employed to defeat the 'eye'. The suggestion is that in order to secure a match, a degree of praise was thought unavoidable, even though this would inevitably attract the evil eye. A mutually beneficial union could only result if the contents of one's 'shop window' were displayed; although this carried a degree of risk, it was the 'lesser of two evils' and worth the hazards entailed, especially since elaborate precautions were then taken 'after the fact' to protect the couple and their goods from malign influence. This in turn implies that the evil eye was thought to be, to some extent, manageable. Perhaps this was the view held in Barra and parts of South Uist, but not shared in other localities. There, the ritual forms seem to suggest that the avoidance of praise until the last moment, until it was 'too late' for the transfer of the bride to be reversed, indicates a very real belief in the risks posed by excessive praise.

c. Buying and selling

The groom's party who arrive at the bride's house posing as buyers are also 'acting out' a situation based on fear of the evil eye. Whilst praise of an object may force a change of ownership, the expression of a desire to buy could have the same effect. Among buyers, marginal figures were especially feared:

Drovers are not, of course, complete strangers in the districts in which they do business, but as a class they are looked on with some suspicion. Thus we are told, 'Some drovers are possessed of the Evil Eye, and in consequence it is considered foolish not to sell any animals to them if they appear anxious to have them.'³¹

Once an offer is made for an animal, refusal can lead to death:

A man taking a valuable horse from the West coast of Kintyre to Tarbet was, after leaving Musadale, offered a considerable sum for it. He said he would not, could not sell the beast, and though the offer was raised to sixty pounds, he still refused and went on his way. Before he reached Tayinloan the horse fell dead on the road.³²

The following example is particularly reminiscent of the groom's party arriving to 'purchase' a father's valuable daughter:

A native of Killeen, Kintyre, tells of a fine cow his father had, and on which the family set a considerable value. A man who had known something about the cow came all the way from Campbeltown purposely to buy her, but the owner declined to sell her. 'If he did, he hardly got any good of her thereafter, for in a short time she became unwell, and lingering for a time, died. The neighbours thought it was a real case of the Evil Eye'.³³

We will recall an example from Gregor quoted earlier in connection with the concept of non-completion:

there were those who were dreaded as buyers, if the purchase was not completed by them. In a short time the animal began to 'dwine', or an accident would befall it, or death speedily followed. Such had an 'ill-ee'. It was alleged that they were well aware of the opinion entertained of their power, and offered a price less than that of the market, fully aware that the seller would rather give the animal at a low price than risk a sale in the market, or no sale at all, for the same men were believed to prevent the sale to any other.³⁴

MacLagan describes a possible remedy for the curse that follows non-completion of a sale:

The reciter's grandfather was a Stratherrick man (Loch Ness), and when attending the market there, was approached by another man to sell him a stirk. There was a good deal of bargaining. No agreement was come to, the offerer leaving as if dissatisfied. Before the market closed the stirk fell to the ground and could not be got to rise. F.'s suspicions of course fell on the rejected offerer. An acquaintance... drew the palm of his hand up the stirk's back against the hair, repeating words which the reciter, however, had never heard. The stirk got to its feet and was soon brisk and well.³⁵

There is a clear connection between an offer to buy an animal and the risk the seller runs if he refuses, and the attentions paid by a young man to his preferred partner. Even the look of a young man was enough to start in motion the chain of events leading to marriage, as MacLagan relates:

A girl had taken suddenly ill. A young man in the neighbourhood was desirous of marrying her, but the suitor was not acceptable, and the girl took every opportunity of letting this be seen. A neighbour, supposed to have special skill and whose method of hanky-panky was the dropping of melted lead into water, was consulted. She went through her performance and showed the lead... in the form of a heart with a hole through it. She explained to the sick girl, 'Look at that, his eye is in you and you are far better to take him'. The match was made, and the girl recovered her health... the idea on the part of the reciter was that actual illness was brought on by the desirous eye of the young man, not merely that the lad had an eye to her as a satisfactory partner.³⁶

She became, one might say, 'settled'. The underlying pattern is the same as with the incomplete sale and the broader issues of 'non-completion' detailed above. Once the process has begun, only its resolution can bring about peace. The young man expresses the wish to obtain the girl just as the buyer does an animal. The extent to which he is 'uncanny' is unclear; but the result is the same as for the 'dreaded' buyers who possessed the evil eye. The groom's party may pose as 'marginal' and as 'buyers' to ensure the bringing about of this *fait accompli*; they want the girl, and once the demand has been made it is certain that she will be delivered to them. Not to do so would result in the same affliction that affected the girl in the above example. It is possible that unscrupulous individuals, perhaps like the young man in the above example, could play upon the evident fears of looking and praising in order to secure a match. In the examples we have obtained, however, it would appear that the groom's party's performance in the character

of buyers with the evil eye is intended to provide amusement for all concerned. The similarity between the bringing in of the women during the refusal sequence and a cattle sale has already been noted. It would appear that this is more than merely a burlesque of a familiar situation that provides the opportunity for amusement. Beneath the 'horseplay' lies the belief that once an offer had been received for an animal, it was safer to let it go, since it would be 'tainted' and difficult or impossible to find another buyer. This obviously invites comparison with the situation of a girl and her preferred 'buyer' or suitor; if she or her family were to refuse the offer, particularly when already set in motion, this would reflect badly on her reputation and make her less attractive to other 'buyers', quite aside from the question of buying, selling and the evil eye.

Another feature of the *rèiteach* which would appear to be related to commerce and the evil eye is the effect of close examination of the bride, as if the buyer were inspecting her in detail. To do this, one must look intensely at the object under examination, which in turn leads to the evil eye. MacLagan provides several examples:

he went for her and brought her home by Kessock Ferry, where some people examined her and admired her. She was a dun, and a fine looking animal. Having reached home the quey was tied in the byre, apparently in good health... after examining the beast [a woman with knowledge of the Evil Eye] told them it was blind.³⁷

For a considerable time none of her cows had quey calves, but at length she got one, a nice beast, of which she was particularly careful... while she was watching this calf this neighbour came out of her own house, and putting her hands on each of her sides, stood and gazed for a few seconds at the calf. While she was staring at it the calf gave a 'loup,' rushed as if it were mad through the place... it seemed as if it could not rest...³⁸

Recently a servant-girl in Islay, having the charge of attending to the feeding of a pig, requested a man who had never been suspected of possessing a hurtful eye to look at the pig to see how it was thriving. The

man refused, adding quite seriously that he did not like to look at a beast that way, in case of any harm being done.³⁹

In the first example, reference is made to 'examining'; in the second, to 'gazing for a few seconds'; and in the last, another suggestion of 'examination'. These are acts clearly distinct from normal 'looking'; *closely* looking at an animal would appear to increase the resulting likelihood or degree of the evil eye to a level above that of the malign glance. The 'inspection' of the bride, as she is brought forward for the groom's party's perusal, seen, for example, in F.J. MacDonald's account of the groom's representative spinning the girl 'round and round, pretending to be running his hands over her' may be seen as a method of further guaranteeing that she will be 'sold'.

Reference may also be made to the belief that the jealous guarding of any object attracted the evil eye. MacLagan remarks, 'without any suspicion of the owner of a beast having the Evil Eye himself, his desire to retain it is supposed to render it specially liable to the evil influence of any one possessed of the power'.⁴⁰ In the context of a *rèiteach* exchange, the bride's father or representative's stated reluctance to part with the 'animal' and frustrating of the bargaining process can be seen perhaps to amount to the deliberate attracting of the evil eye in order to further secure the girl's departure.

d. Thigging

Examples of the ritual 'asking' were found where the groom's party were not 'buyers', but fellow farmers who requested assistance of some kind. The tradition of thigging has already been mentioned, and may now be included as part of the evil eye complex.

In our earlier discussion of thigging, we noted the obligation to observe this community norm, no matter how arduous. One may speculate that although drifters and strangers were most often suspected of having the evil eye, this may have extended to all 'non-producers'; it would appear that fear of the evil eye was part of the general anxiety which surrounded a visit from an itinerant beggar-bard aside from harm resulting from their maledictions.

If refusal of help to those starting up a croft was not an option, then turning away those suspected of being in possession of the evil eye was unthinkable. In his study, MacLagan offers a whole chapter entitled 'People Should Give When Asked'. Although this deals mainly with the perils of not proceeding with a sale, the same principle applied to those merely seeking assistance. Of one woman believed to be in possession of the Eye, MacLagan states plainly that 'the danger of refusing a request is great, not so much from the purely Christian-charity point of view, as from that of escaping the Evil Eye'. Describing a woman feared for her evil eye, MacLagan remarks 'people would do almost anything than offend her, so general was the impression that she could injure any person if she wished to do so... she could have almost whatever she chose to ask, so much were they afraid of her Evil Eye'.⁴¹ We may conclude that to refuse a request for assistance was to run an equivalent risk to the refusal to sell, or failure to complete a sale once an offer had been made. In other words, in terms of the evil eye, no distinction can be made between the groom's party employing the motif of the fellow farmers seeking assistance and those expressing an interest in buying an animal or other object.

III. Concealment, distraction and silence

The evil eye may also be in operation in connection with the customs of the 'hidden bride' and the procession of 'false brides' refused by the groom's party.

Although the effects of the evil eye may begin before the groom's party visit, shown in the bride's 'tendency to roam' or 'unsettled state' we have noted many cases in which the bride is deliberately hidden before their visit. Hiding a prized object was a recognised preventative measure:

There is one simple way of keeping your property safe from the Evil Eye: viz., by not letting it be known that you have what may be affected... a certain Calum Ban, having the name of the Evil Eye, others kept things out of his sight for fear that he might hurt them... My mother said that she... was not in the custom of showing the butter to any one... 'be sure that you do not let the whole of the butter be seen by anybody'.⁴²

An account from the eighteenth century Highlands would appear to confirm this link between the 'hidden bride', the visitors and the evil eye:

If the preliminaries were adjusted, the whole company repaired to the bride's house, where an entertainment was provided. Then it was she made her first appearance, for before agreement it would have been reckoned indecent, and even ominous, to have seen her, or to have entered the house where she was.⁴³

It is of interest that 'agreement' has to be reached before the bride is seen. To have done so would have marked her in some way, although this could be in terms of her 'value', linked with the evil eye and trade, or with her fertility, linked with traditions of milk-spoiling. We may compare this with the account from the Dewar manuscripts where the suitor's representative not only enters the house, but the girl's bedroom. We have previously noted

that this action is a violation of the norms of hospitality, normally only breached during specially licenced seasonal rites. We may now also speculate that this latter action is a deliberate violation of the norms of visiting a bride-to-be, and can be seen as a deliberate act which places the 'ominous' eye upon her, more or less ensuring her departure.

We might add that the bride's family's refusal to acknowledge that they are in possession of the object requested can also be seen as a method of protection from unwelcome eyes. Silence, another feature of the ritual, may also be effective; George Henderson states 'It is not right at milking time if a person passes who is suspected of having the evil eye to *answer* him even though he addresses you. Your silence, or the animosity signified thereby, has an influence in checking any harm that may come from him'.⁴⁴ This may also explain in part the hostility and lack of hospitality we have already noted. One account from Mull given by MacLagan would appear to centre on the refusal of entry; a woman's cow is sick, and she has approached a friend for help:

he advised her... not to allow anyone to see the cow on any account, for three would soon pass, he said, and if she would allow them in to see the cow, the cow would be gone. The three were strong, and she would need to use all her strength to keep them out...Having got tubs she filled them with stones and placed them against the byre door with spades and everything she could think of to keep the door from being opened. She was not long there when a man passed with a horse and a dog. He came to the kitchen door and asked the children where their mother was, but they did not tell him. He then came to the byre door, lifted the sneck, and when it did not yield tried to force it open with all his might, saying.. 'Kate, John's daughter, are you there?' My mother knew his voice as that of a near neighbour, and answered: 'Yes, John, the cow is unwell, and she is lying behind the door and you cannot get in'. My mother had to tell the lie, or he would force the door open. The man went away... the man, the horse and the dog... and the cow got better.⁴⁵

In this account entry is resisted in order that the person in possession of the evil eye cannot

lay eyes upon the stricken animal, and kill it. We might compare this to the girl-as-animal already afflicted by the evil eye, and her family resisting the stranger-neighbours as they attempt to cross the threshold. Once the groom's party have gained entry, the girl's fate is sealed. We may note the high incidence of cases involving the evil eye where the animal is female and the suspect either a stranger or near-neighbour. MacLagan remarks that visitors to a house, if they do not wish to be suspected of ill-will, should bless both the home and its occupants before entering - something the groom's party pointedly fail to do.⁴⁶

We must also consider the possibility that the purpose of the presentation of women other than the bride is intended to draw the evil eye away from the real one. In the first stage, all the women are hidden; then one by one, substitutes are offered. Since, according to one of MacLagan's informants it is 'always the best and prettiest of beast or body that was most liable to be injured by a bad eye', it seems reasonable that the 'false brides' are rejected because they lack just these qualities. Analogues from other cultures suggest this theory of concealment; the Shilluk of Sudan, whose beliefs and practices are 'almost certainly cognate to the evil eye complex found throughout the Indo-European and Semitic world' protect their cattle from the evil eye in the following way:

A very fine appearing cow is not permitted to go into the village by herself but is kept with the herd, and she is to be kept in the middle of the herd so that she may not be seen, and the curse come on her. A very fine cow is always kept hidden.⁴⁷

We will note that this is highly reminiscent of the constraints on the movement of brides and grooms previously discussed. In India, a royal wedding entailed the participation of false brides. A. Stewart Woodburn reports that 'in 1906 when a royal wedding was in

progress in Travancore, a group of Nayar girls, attractively dressed, went in procession before the royal palanquin to avert the evil eye from the wedding group'.⁴⁸

In Folktales and Reality, a study dedicated to tracing links between folktale motifs and actual practice, Lutz Röhrich details examples of tales which correspond to the hidden bride ritual, where discovery leads directly to marriage. As we have noted, in folk practice the bride need not actually be hidden; the groom may be faced with a group of identically-dressed women and be forced to identify the true bride from the false. Röhrich concludes that the purpose of the 'hidden bride' custom is 'to deceive the demonic and evil powers so they cannot identify the actual couple getting married, i.e., the people in danger because of their transitional status'.⁴⁹

It is of interest that Juliette Wood has noted the motif of the hidden bride in Welsh versions of the Fairy Bride legend. In these the suitor must identify her from among her identical sisters, and in one example a pre-arranged signal helps him make the correct decision.⁵⁰

IV. Conclusion

The elements common to the *rèiteach* and linked with the evil eye may be summarised as follows:

1. the visitors are strangers, beggars, bards [marginals feared, especially as buyers]
2. they request assistance or express wish to buy [refusal is risky]
3. after denial or resistance they cross the threshold [the girl is hidden]

4. substitutes are revealed and dispraised [evil eye is on them, but they are not desired; attempt to distract or dilute evil eye]
5. the girl is revealed to them or she is located [impact of buyer's eye, produce or object now 'spoiled' if not previously compromised]
6. she is accepted [agreement of sale cannot be revoked without causing harm to object]
7. she is examined closely [intensification of impact of looking]
8. she is praised [further intensification of the 'eye' in her; she must now be transferred to buyers to avoid harm to both the girl and family.]

One could argue that this absolves the girl's father of the responsibility for *freely* agreeing to her departure; he lets his daughter go, not through choice but through necessity. The same logic could be said to underpin the dramatising of her departure as being the result of 'abduction'; again, the father is absolved of responsibility and so retains the highest possible status for himself, his family and his protesting daughter.

The tradition of the evil eye would appear to lie beneath many of the motifs and actions identified in the *rèiteach*, and by extension to the comparable rituals from Brittany, Bulgaria and elsewhere. The overall sense is that the groom's party use this tradition not as a threat of any kind, but effectively 'quote' from it, in order to gain entry and secure delivery of the girl. This pattern was previously noted with regard to territorial and boundary rituals, and as then, we can interpret this as providing a method by which the bride's family can preserve the maximum status, a means of presenting the loss of their daughter as a 'no-win' situation, just as the verbal contest incorporates a fixed outcome.

The family do all they can; they do not welcome the visitors but resist them, but community norms on entry and/or fear of the evil eye dictate that they must enter, or be helped. They hide the girl or present substitutes, but once afflicted or the object is bargained for or praised it must be given away; to save the girl's life and the prosperity of the family she must be allowed to leave. As with the boundary rituals, we must see the tradition of the evil eye as providing another 'template' for action in a highly-charged situation which, unregulated, could lead to ill-feeling and conflict.

To some extent, however, and in some contexts, this anxiety may have been actual. For families who were not intimate with one another, in the context of a 'surprise attack', for example, community norms governing entry and hospitality, and fears of the evil eye, satire and cursing would give the strangers a distinct advantage.

Notes

1. Alan Dundes, ed., The Evil Eye: A Casebook (Madison and London: U of Wisconsin P, 1992) 81, 86-106, 145, 216, 230, 264-6.
2. John M. Roberts, 'Belief in the Evil Eye in World Perspective', in Clarence Maloney, ed., The Evil Eye (New York: Columbia UP, 1976) 241, 243.
3. R.C. MacLagan, Evil Eye in the Western Highlands (London: Nutt, 1902) 61, 92, 123.
4. See MacLagan 114-176, 192-198; Henderson 294-301; Carmichael 146, 148-150.
5. MacLagan 89.
6. Gregor, Folklore 194.
7. MacLagan 82.
8. 'The Figwort' Carmina Gadelica, 149-150.
9. A. Stewart Woodburn, 'Evil Eye in South Indian Folklore', in Dundes, 64.
10. Radost 44.
11. Aaron Brav, 'Evil Eye among the Hebrews', in Dundes, 49.
12. MacLagan 45.
13. Regina Dionisopoulos-Mass, 'The Evil-Eye and Bewitchment in a Peasant Village', in Maloney, 58.
14. Dionisopoulos-Mass, in Maloney, 54.
15. 'Countering the evil-eye' Carmina Gadelica 386.
16. 'Checking the evil eye' Carmina Gadelica 391.
17. Alan Dundes, 'Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye', in Dundes 264, 266.
18. Dundes 266-7.
19. Dundes 274.

20. John Shaw, 'The Ethnography of Speaking and Verbal Taxonomies: Some Applications to Gaelic' Proceedings of the 10th Annual Congress of Celtic Studies ed. Ronald Black, William Gillies and Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh. East Linton: Tuckwell P, 1997: 17. In press at the time of writing.

21. Shaw 17. In a footnote the author cites a Cape Breton informant who observed '*Ma tha thu 'gam moladh suas ro mhór dh'fhaodadh an t-each sin gun sgath feum a dheanamh do dhuine*' 'If you praise them [animals] up too much that horse could be of no use to anyone'. The author also notes that 'the same debility could be brought about by an unreasonably high offer for an animal' and that 'the practice was also known to the Gaelic aristocracy' citing an example from the first quarter of the 18th century.

22. Gregor, Folklore 8-9, 220.

23. MacLagan 52.

24. MacLagan 76.

25. MacLagan 9.

26. MacLagan 17.

27. MacLagan 116-18

28. eg. MacLagan 33.

29. Donald J MacDonald, DJ MacDonald MS 5368-79.

30. Dionisopoulos-Mass, in Maloney 56.

31. MacLagan 48.

32. MacLagan 88.

33. MacLagan 49-50.

34. Gregor, Folklore 184.

35. MacLagan 196.

36. MacLagan 198-9.

37. MacLagan 58-59

38. MacLagan 59-60

39. MacLagan 33.
40. MacLagan 45.
41. MacLagan 48, 69.
42. MacLagan 37, 86.
43. Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century 2: 419.
44. Henderson, Survivals, 297.
45. MacLagan 84-5.
46. MacLagan 114.
47. Rev. D.S. Oyler, 'Shilluk's Belief in the Evil Eye', in Dundes 81.
48. A. Stewart Woodburne, 'Evil Eye in South Indian Folklore', in Dundes 63.
49. Lutz Röhrich, Folktales and Reality trans. Peter Tokovsky. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 101. The author mentions Grimm tales (KHM) 11 'Little brother and Little Sister'; 88 'The Liling, Leaping Lark'; 135 'The White Bride and the Black Bride'; 198 'Maid Maleen'.
50. Juliette Wood, 'The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales', Folklore 103 (1992): 69. She identifies the motifs as H161.0.1 *Recognition of person among identical companions, prearranged signal*; H324 *Suitor test: choosing princess from among identically clad sisters*; H335.0.1 *Bride helps suitor perform tasks*.

Chapter Eight

Marriage dialogues and dialogic verbal art

In this chapter we will attempt to place the rituals described in a wider context and suggest other forms of verbal art to which the marriage dialogues may be related, namely seasonal dialogues and bardic contests and flytings.

I. Seasonal dialogues

Links between marriage ritual dialogue and seasonal traditions have been suggested in previous chapters, while notions of free or restricted access are suggestive of mumming traditions of the end of the year. The Breton *bazvalan* made his post-wedding rounds visiting the homes of unmarried women disguised as a horse or goat, distributing his 'sweets', perhaps an inversion of a seasonal visiting custom where the figure in animal hide receives treats from the householders. The clearest example of this link between seasonal and marriage custom is the close similarity in Welsh tradition between the marriage *pwnco* and the question-and-answer entry rituals *canu yn drws* found in the visiting custom of the *Mari Lwyd*. This custom involves a man dressed as a horse, which, like the Breton *bazvalan*'s visits, pays special attention to women. Whilst mummers or guisers in many cultures sing or speak verses in order to receive money or be invited in to perform, the Welsh custom is remarkable in that entry may depend on the outcome of a verbal battle. Trefor Owen quotes the following 18th century description of the events on Christmas Eve:

The custom was for sets of people to traverse the neighbourhood and sing at the doors of houses, where they knew there was Gwirod (wassail) provided, several ludicrous verses, or a kind of burlesque songs in honour of the Virgin Mary. They were answered by others from within which were previously provided for the purpose, and if the latter were furnished with more number of stanzas, and were more witty and expert in performing their part, the outer ones were obliged to decamp without any treat: but usually the inward party gave way so as the others might be admitted to partake of their entertainment.¹

It is important to note that entry really could be refused; in contrast with the ritual, mock contest with a fixed outcome that characterises both the marriage and, for example, summer/winter battles, here verbal skill is a prerequisite for entry. In an example Owen gives from Anglesey, those outside claim that they have heard that pretty girls are inside, a strategy which resembles many examples of dialogues discussed above as well as a marriage *pwnco* previously noted where the groom's bard, facing the *Gwahoddwr* or 'bidder' inside begins 'Somebody fair is hiding here,/ Somebody who to us is dear'. As in the marriage *pwnco*, where the bride's defenders resisted entry by claiming not to know why the visitors had come and that their daughter was too young, resistance can be offered in the seasonal custom by specially prepared verses;

The carollers were told that they had come at the wrong time, that the cellar was empty and that the table would be laid with the hide of a cow instead of a cloth, that instead of trenchers there were slate utensils, instead of bag puddings and chicken there were snails and moles, and so on.²

It is interesting to note that this method of resisting entry could be interpreted as a verbalised version of the non-verbal methods employed by the Breton families who wished to convey to the *bazvalan* the futility of his errand; as we have seen, a similar inversion of

the norms of hospitality also formed part of the tradition in Highland Scotland. There may also be, as we have noted in Ireland, recourse to law in refusing hospitality 'on account of the smallness of wealth'; the cellar is empty. Owen also makes it clear that as with marriage dialogues the verses provided an opportunity to satirise errant contemporaries.³ A young woman was the preferred choice to open the door, and in many cases once inside the carollers demanded that a virgin be sat on a chair with a baby on her lap. They would then sing verses to her whilst circling the chair.⁴ Elsewhere Owen remarks that once inside the *Mari Lwyd* 'paid special attention to the womenfolk, nudging, blowing, neighing and biting them, besides talking'. Women were often kissed by other members of the party.⁵ He notes the similarity of the custom to that of the 'coullin' at New Year's eve on Rathlin island, where

once inside the party, among other things, walked around a chair in which the woman of the house had been placed repeating a rhyme in Irish as they did so. Coullin was also known in Scotland, though without the chair-circling. Here, however, as with other New Year's customs, the men were turned out while the women secured the door from within.⁶

Again, the carollers' insistence on being allowed entry and access to the womenfolk is reminiscent of the marriage rituals, and the seasonally-licensed behaviour of the *Mari Lwyd* is distinctly sexual in nature, suggesting a connection with fertility consonant with the frequently bawdy nature of the wedding customs we have described. We may also compare these actions of the *Mari Lwyd* to, for example, the close 'inspection' of the women at the Harris *rèiteach* or the risqué content of the dialogue. The overall impression is that, notwithstanding the religious nature of the occasion, entry is again somehow related to the breaching of a boundary controlled by women; in other words, the women

occupy the inner space, resist and are (usually) overcome, a pattern we have previously noted as being a dramatisation of the sex-act itself. Owen makes reference to R.L. Greene's discussion of Holly and Ivy refrains as representing male and female symbols, and gives this example; "in which the feminine party of Ivy would be excluded from a company representing those in the hall... 'Holly with his merry men they can dance in hall,/ Ivy and her jentyl women cannot dance at all./ Holly and his merry men sytt in chayres of gold,/ Ivy and her gentyll women sit wythout in fold'".⁷ This separation of the womenfolk is reminiscent of the 'hidden bride' and other customs where seclusion precedes the women's ritual involvement.

As with the *Mari Lwyd*, the celebration of *oidhche Challain* or Hogmanay in Gaelic Scotland involved a group, including a man dressed in animal skin, reciting verses intended to induce the householder to 'open up' - in other words, ritual entry. Indeed, these verses typically conclude with a 'let us in!' formula. Alexander Carmichael describes the visit of the *gilleann Callaig*;

The roof of the house being raised from the inner edge of the wall, a broad terrace is left on the outside... One man is enveloped in the hard hide of a bull with the horns and hoofs still attached. When the men come to a house they ascend the wall and run round sunwise, the man in the hide shaking the horns and hoofs, and the other men striking the hard hide with sticks. The appearance of the man in the hide is gruesome, while the din made is terrific. Having descended and recited their runes at the door, the Hogmanay men are admitted and treated to the best in the house.⁸

Owen is incorrect in his assertion that the 'chair-circling' of the lady of the house and/or baby was unknown in Scotland, as the following example of a Hogmanay rhyme from *Carmina Gadelica* confirms:

Now since we came to the country

To renew to you the Hogmanay,
Time will not allow us to explain,
It has been since the age of our fathers.

Ascending the wall of the house,
Descending at the door,
My carol to say modestly,
As becomes me at Hogmanay.

The Hogmanay skin is in my pocket,
Great the fume that will come from that;
No one who shall inhale its odour,
But shall be forever from it healthy.

The house-man will get it in his grasp,
He will put its point in the fire;
He will go sun-wise round the children,
And very specially the goodwife.

The wife will get it, she it is who deserves it,
The hand to distribute the Hogmanay,
The hand to bestow upon us cheese and butter,
The hand without niggardliness, without meanness.

Since drought has come upon the land,
And that we do not expect rarity,
A little of the substance of the summer,
Would we desire with the bread.

If that we are not to have it,
If thou mayest, do not detain us;
I am the servant of God's Son on Hogmanay,
Arise thyself and open the door.
Hogmanay here! Hogmanay here!⁹

Indeed, Ronald Black notes 'Once inside the house the lads go three times sunwise round the fire, still chanting. If the fire is not in the middle of the floor a chair is placed there instead'.¹⁰ Unlike the Welsh custom, this would appear to be, or to have evolved into, a monologic tradition. The fact remains, however, that this is threshold ritual entry, and a custom which focuses on the woman as the source of the 'bounty' they have come to seek

- the 'substance of the summer' that lies behind the door. Another similarity with the marriage rituals is that the visitors appear to employ the custom of 'thigging' as justification for entry; the boys plead a 'drought' as part of their plea to be let in. Could it be that this request for entry was at some point a ritual dialogue, along the lines of the *Mari Lwyd* or the Scottish and Irish exchanges associated with the admitting of Bride to the house? In the *Gasslgehen* we saw evidence for dialogic visiting traditions becoming monologic and non-improvised, based on communal texts; in Bulgaria we saw a lengthy ritual entry dialogue reduced to the exchange of single words. We also saw evidence that the well-known 'roping customs' were once accompanied by ritual dialogue in Wales, but later mainly reported as 'mute'. Might these Hogmanay 'carols' not once have involved the householders - perhaps mainly the women - in ritual acts amounting to more than merely lifting the latch? Ronald Black notes that 'each part of the ritual had its own accompanying chant, its *duan* or *rann Callain*'; might not the first of these, the 'strangers' request for entry have been in dialogue form, as the *rèiteach* begins? Change certainly affected the ritual; Ronald Black notes that the ritual dispensation of a dram before the boys moved on to the next house was in this century abandoned in favour of the passing out of oranges.¹¹

We may conclude that to some degree seasonal visiting customs and contests were also about the bringing together of the male and female principles, if not fully fledged 'battles of the sexes' as we find in marriage ritual. At these liminal times of year the natural order was in flux, while a marriage presented another occasion when tensions could again arise, this time over a change in the social order, and when the male principle had to be tested and triumph. With the seasonal verbal contest, refusal of entry was rare, but 'built-in'

as an option, perhaps to enable undesirables to be excluded as well as to test verbal skill. Robin Gwyndaf points out that in Wales the poet 'inside', who always performed solo, may have had a higher status than those 'outside'. He gives the example of one man who had followed the *Mari Lwyd* for five years before becoming an 'indoor singer'. His task was then 'to circulate ahead of the *Mari*, moving on first to the next destination' where he could defend the household:

Mari Lwyd:

Cenwch eich gorau
Felly gwnaf finnau
A'r sawl a fo orau - gaiff gwrw.

People in the house:

Dyw wiw i chwi'n scwto
A Chwnnu'r *latch* heno,
Waith prydydd diguro - wyf, gwiriaf.

ML:

Sing your best, I shall do so too, and whoever is the best shall have ale.

House:

It is no use your pushing us or to lift the latch tonight, since I am an unbeatable rhymers.¹²

The 'inside' bard also distributed stanzas around the houses 'so that others might delay the Mari's entry'.¹³ Gwyndaf concurs with Owen that the essential purpose of the verse-contest was to prolong rather than refuse entry.¹⁴ In its fullest form, Owen details the seasonal visit as involving a verse exchange at the threshold, a verse from the visitors on entry, a 'change of tempo' for the verses sung around the chair, and a final verse of thanks, presumably on leaving. As Owen remarks, 'this was a much more structured ritual than we might have been led to suppose from a casual and hurried... general description [given by

contemporary observers]'.¹⁵ The same point could be made with regard to the often superficial and self-consciously literary descriptions on which we have had to rely for some accounts of the marriage ritual but which through investigation we have identified as being equally clearly structured. The other periodic battle between the male and female principles, the marriage *pwnco*, and perhaps by extension those comparable Celtic customs which appear to be now more monologic or even mute, may be seen as extending, 'borrowing' or 'quoting' this seasonal mechanism, and we have seen that a similar system operated when a household bard was challenged by an outsider for his position, which he had to defend on the threshold. In the seasonal contest, refusal of entry was a possibility, though a rare occurrence. The doorstep bardic contest was a true struggle for entry, the 'inside' bard competing for his job. In the context of a 'fetching the bride' ritual, however, refusal to allow entry to the male side would be almost impossible to imagine. The ritual conceptions which lie behind these customs are not, however, at all clear, and a thorough analysis of seasonal verses would be required for further progress to be made. Owen himself offers only the following by way of conclusion; 'we are quite clearly here dealing with disparate elements, religious and secular, of considerable antiquity and with a wide geographical distribution, involving light and darkness, male and female, spring and autumn or harvest'.¹⁶ In addition, both the seasonal and marriage rituals are connected with a period of license; Ronald Black notes this aspect of the Highland New Year,¹⁷ whilst we will recall that one Harris informant remarked that the *rèiteach* was an occasion where although 'solemn, religious and pious... you were allowed to let your hair down for a short time'.¹⁸

It is to be hoped that the current study, which has made reference to a wide variety of entry rituals, has contributed to furthering discussion of this complex subject.

II. Bardic contests and flytings

We have previously discussed traditions of the *Cliar Sheanchain* and bardic contest in connection with ritual entry and expulsion, and noted the enthusiasm for inter-community verse contest in Wales, as well as related traditions such as the holding of riddle contests as part of marriage custom. John MacInnes observes that verse contests are 'fairly common' in Gaelic tradition,¹⁹ and Gaelic flytings are mainly 'short extempore verses of repartee', spoken rather than sung and 'probably related' to flyting in Scots. In the waulking-song tradition, however, 'there are several sustained flytings in which women protagonists eulogize their own clan and territory in contrast to those of their opponents.'²⁰ Although in this study, aside from the tradition of the *Cliar Sheanchain*, we have mainly been able to find links between Welsh and Breton bardic contest and marriage custom, given the often explicit identification of the rival representatives as 'bards' or 'poets' there can be little doubt that these agonistic ritual entry dialogues form part of this broader Celtic tradition.²¹ Although accounts of bardic contests are rare, it is well-known that formal contests in abusive verse were held between rival court poets in Scotland, performed in front of an appreciative audience as entertainment. Verses circulated as broadsides,²² and the most famous examples of literary flyting, Dunbar's The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie (c.1500-5) and Montgomerie's The Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart (c.1580) are dazzling exercises based on these encounters between court poets.

We may detect a faint echo of these formal contests in many of the exchanges we have detailed. In one Breton example from Villemarqué, the marriage dialogue was preceded by a lying or boasting contest, the tone of which verged on the mocking; we may recall also (admittedly mild) derogatory remarks aimed at the physical appearance of the groom's *bazvalan*. We have previously noted Guilcher's observation of Breton verbal art generally that 'in subject-matter, the sung poetry can assume (or disguise) brutal forms very close to physical combat'.²³

In all examples we may identify the poet's consciousness of his role as poet, the dramatic attitude adopted towards his material and the combination of highly expressive, spontaneous language within a strictly defined controlling ritual structure. The fact that only mild insults and teasing are present in the marriage dialogues of Scotland, Brittany and Wales is of interest. All participants would know the dangers inherent in flirting with true satirical language, and despite the ritual bringing together two rival poets for a contest, a degree of decorum and self-censorship would surely be necessary to avoid ill-feeling and the charge of having malevolent intentions. Interestingly, to criticise the appearance of another was against the law in early Ireland; Fergus Kelly observes that

Verbal assaults on a person are regarded with the utmost seriousness. The words for 'to satirize' (*áerad* and *rindad*) have the basic meanings 'to strike' and 'to cut', which indicates the destructive power which satire was believed to hold... These include a wide range of verbal assaults: mocking a person's appearance, publicizing a physical blemish, coining a nickname which sticks... a person may be guilty of satire even by mocking through gesture another's physical defect or peculiarity.²⁴

Many examples may be found of court-cases involving flyting in 16th and 17th century Scotland.²⁵ The encounter between the bards at a wedding may in some ways resemble a

flyting, but it is a 'mock' version, as befits the occasion. As in the marriage dialogue, and traditions such as verse-capping, silence in flyting signals defeat; in the Welsh bardic contest *ymryson* seen in Taliesin 'the poet *par excellence* boasts of having silenced the other bards'; reference is made to the winner having higher bardic standards and having asserted his superiority.²⁶ We have previously noted what appears to be the formal conceding of defeat by the bride's bard in both Breton and Welsh tradition, and linked this with formal rules governing poetic contest and the procedure for the displacement of a household bard. In terms of genre, little distinction would appear to be made between bardic contest and flyting.²⁷ Celtic tradition is immensely rich in this area of dialogic verbal art, which remains as yet relatively unexplored. Literary flyting in Scots has received more attention, although has yet to be thoroughly examined in the context of the oral tradition to which it is undoubtedly intimately related. The Breton traditions of *joutes oratoires*, *kan-a-boz* and the *discours* or *disput* - verse-contests performed informally or at festivals - have been examined by Malrieu and others, though the subject is by no means exhausted.²⁸ The *discours* or *disput*, for example, resembles a flyting:

the phrases chosen are often intended to insult or provoke, often even verging on the coarse. The purpose was to ridicule the opponent, to have the last word and equally, in order to ensure victory, to have the laughter on one's side.²⁹

These could be completely improvised, or based on 'un répertoire de formules' or even learned from books.³⁰

The limited scope of the present study precludes close examination of these fascinating analogues - it is clear that both the doorstep exchanges and the extended

allegorical dialogue of the *rèiteach* belong to these wider traditions. We may, however, briefly focus on three aspects of verbal contest which will serve to further illuminate important themes - the battle of the sexes, the contract with witnesses, and the regulation of conflict.

III. Other aspects of verbal contests

a. The battle of the sexes

In previous chapters we have outlined the defeat of the bride's representative and the entry of the groom's as being analogous to defloration. The house is identified with the bride's body, and the opening of the door symbolises her succumbing to the male advance. The act of entry is cued by what is presented as the inability to reply, but which is in reality a willingness on the bride's side not to reply, to deliberately concede. As we have seen, the same link between submission, lack of power and silence has been noted in traditions of the *cliar sheanchain*, *pwnco* and bardic contests. To have no reply is to have no defence and thus to lose and submit; victory is seen in terms of the placing of one party in the 'feminine' or lower, yielding position. The marriage dialogue shares this ritual conception with flyting tradition.

A cursory examination of flyting, as well as insults in general, will reveal that characteristically the most common abuse centres on ancestry, physical appearance, comparison to animals, social standing, poetic ability and sexuality.³¹ Whilst literary forms like Dunbar's and Montgomerie's flytings appear to give more or less equal prominence

to these topics, many examples collected from oral sources appear to favour sexual symbolism, often linking winning with phallic aggression and defeat with the adoption of an explicitly submissive, feminine posture. Kenneth Goldstein describes a genre of verse contest from North East Scotland he terms 'verse competition jest', where a husband and wife argue over who will get up from bed to blow out the candle, or do some other domestic chore. The verses are mildly obscene, and Goldstein concludes 'that the contestants be of opposite sexes is, apparently, an essential element in this... combat, for the competition verses, undoubtedly the central motif, stress the opposition of the male sexual organs to their female counterparts'.³² This opposition is also discernible in the threshold ritual dialogues, another form of what Goldstein terms 'inter-sexual combat'. In other words, in the context of a marriage the verbal battle is not just between the two representatives and the sexes they symbolise, but conceived of as a struggle between the opposing sexual organs. It is surely this which underlies the Austrian girl's taunt, previously noted; 'Go away from my window/ If you were a real boy/ You would already be inside'. Her message is this; his poetry is inferior, he is not inside, therefore he lacks the necessary equipment to enter, he lacks masculinity.

Further evidence of this ritual conception is found in Abraham's well-known study of the 'Dozens', an Afro-American flyting tradition, where the vast majority of insults centre on 'the effeminacy or homosexuality of father or brother' as well as the alleged wantonness of the combatants' mothers, and 'all that is feminine, frail, unmanly', qualities attributed to the contestant who fails to reply to a well-aimed insult.³³ Alan Dundes' study of a similar tradition in Turkey reveals the same impulse, the goal of this remarkably

obscene insult exchange being 'to force one's opponent into a female, passive role... [to] accept the brunt of the verbal duelist's attacking phallus.... the victim either has to submit to phallic aggression himself or else watch helplessly as phallic aggression is carried out upon his female extensions, his mother or sister'.³⁴ Again, silence or capitulation means 'that he is reduced to the female, receptive role'.³⁵ There is little variation in material; this whole tradition of sexual expression through verbal aggression rests on the employment of the imagery of penetration, accompanied by phallic gestures.³⁶ A Basque tradition of resolving dispute between shepherds through flyting is called *xikito*, a term derived from the verb *xikitatu* 'to castrate'.³⁷

Perhaps these comparisons seem far-fetched; the purpose of the analogy with these traditions of thrust, parry and counter-thrust is, however, to place in the wider context of this form of verbal contest such details as the repeated attempts at entry made by the male representative (or even the groom himself), before he is permitted into the protected space; and that successful entry leads inexorably to defloration and childbirth; and that common to many diverse cultures is the condition that this last boundary may not be breached until the male side overcome female resistance in the form of winning a verbal contest. On a physical level, to push forward and penetrate this last layer of female resistance is to be hyper-masculine, to have 'opened up' is feminine; on the verbal level, to persist and prevail until the other side offers no opposition is manly; to be reduced to silence and capitulation is feminine. The prevalence of sexual imagery in these ritual verbal encounters (all focused on adolescent males) and the marriage dialogues suggests a common ritual conception; the connection between verbal facility and sexual potency. As

we have seen, the same impulse lies behind the *Gasselgehen*, where the transition from boy to man is also accompanied by the mastering of verbal forms, sexual in content, whose function is again both to assert one's place in the male hierarchy and to persuade a girl to 'open up' and invite them in. The difference, of course, is that in the context of a wedding, only mock-resistance is offered by the side identified as feminine. The exchange of insults has been shown to have been a feature of fertility rites,³⁸ and perhaps it is a cathartic release of sexual anxiety that emerges in the marriage dialogues, where bawdy innuendo and punning have been shown to play important roles.

b. The contract with witnesses

Another important aspect shared by the ritual dialogues and flyting is the notion of co-operation and contract between the two representatives, and the role of the audience as necessary witnesses not only for the quasi-legal significance of the words uttered, but also in order for honour to be publicly bestowed.

We have previously noted the unequal position of the groom and the bride, and how despite the inevitability of the female side 'losing', a degree of notional equality is temporarily asserted through the combat of the two bards. In the same way as victory in a duel against a weaker adversary would be dishonourable, and a flyting against an inferior opponent carry no credit, it is important that the representatives treat one another as equals, keeping up the pretence of a genuine contest until the cue is given for one to concede. Similarly, as Kenneth Simpson points out of flyting, 'the contest in vilification presupposes... mutual respect or even friendship between the participants'.³⁹ We may

recall that the two bards in Villemarqué's account are '*amis*' and address one another using the informal '*tu*'. As we have seen, the exchange always takes place in front of an audience, perhaps gathered in front of the house or in the street, and for similar reasons to the bardic contest; for reasons of entertainment and of establishing rank. It is not enough for a bard or family to prove themselves to their own satisfaction; the proof of skill, or honour or sexual identity must be confirmed publicly and ritually. The notion of equality is crucial; of marriage in early 18th century Ireland, S.J. Connolly observes:

In so far as marriage was a financial arrangement, in the first place, it was an exchange between equals, in which there was generally no reason why either side should give more than it received. A bride would indeed bring with her a portion in cash or, less commonly, land. But this had to be matched by an equivalent provision... a satisfactory financial arrangement was of course important, but it was a necessary precondition to an alliance rather than the end to be attained.⁴⁰

What separates the threshold ritual contest from heroic flyting exchange is that the former is not primarily a contest about individual merit and honour; it is rather concerned with publicly displaying the relative worthiness of the families they represent, dramatising their alliance. Arguably, the true hierarchical position of each poet is in no way connected to the emotional needs of the families concerned; what is important is that each family feels their honour has been adequately articulated. In practice, both functions are likely to be present. The Chambri people of Polynesia hire orators to debate on behalf of individual families, and the same dual-function is evident:

the orators are also representatives of '*sides*'... competing clans or moieties. That is to say, not only does a successful orator advance his standing among his confederates, with whom he is vying for status, but his success also benefits the groups to which he belongs.⁴¹

In this marriage contest, 'losing' - and one side *are* diminished - must be artfully conveyed; there can be no suggestion of the humiliation of either side. In flyting exchange, however, the mere fact of the contest presupposes an uncertainty as to who will win. As we noted with the Welsh seasonal exchange, there is some suggestion that the bard 'inside' may be more experienced; he would thus be able to extend the contest, resisting and blocking his opponent until by some common consensus sufficient credit had been reflected on the bride's family. It may be that in order to achieve equilibrium between the families, the side that will 'lose' are represented by the most able bard, or at least the bard who is by tradition allowed to control the proceedings. We will recall that a similar discrepancy in the contributions of the two sides was noted in the extended *rèiteach* dialogue from Harris. It is in this notion of collaboration that the ritual encounter between the bards as part of marriage custom resembles a flyting contest. There is both interdependence and opposition in these events; as the dialogue proceeds, the two adversaries are continuously collaborating in a joint course of action to which they are both committed. As the poet puts forward a new insult, or opens an allegorical allusion, he is offering his opponent the opportunity to display his ingenuity at his expense; the principle of concord is as important as that of contest. In this respect, the encounter is a perfect symbol of the emerging relationship between the two families; their comparison presupposes their comparability. Like the bards, they may still remain at a ritual distance from one another, perhaps still manoeuvring for position, but steadily, inexorably moving toward eventual union, publicly expressed. This union is preceded by a verbal test, and the groom's side, naturally, found to be worthy - to be found unworthy would, after all, reflect badly on the bride's family as

well. This explains why these contests take place after a decision has been made; they dramatise the dynamic of the original decision-making encounter, and publicise its success.

As with the unspoken rules which govern a flyting, the quasi-contractual nature of the bards' exchange, the format for which is socially determined, lends meaning to the ritual exchanges which will subsequently take place between the bride and groom and their respective families. The meaning may be this; it is not only the couple at the centre of the ritual who are engaged in a process which emphasises the benefits of union and joint work, but the entire community performing in a highly complex, multi-layered manifestation of the principles of mutual respect and aid, collaboration and interdependence. Adversativeness and conflict is raised to be then put aside for the common good. We will recall that this relationship is brought out in much of the allegorical language we have noted; the two halves of a 'couple', for example - distinct but interdependent, born of the same soil.

The observers of both a bardic contest and a marriage exchange must be drawn from a wider group than their immediate associates; their *objectivity* is necessary to legitimise the honour and status claimed, to provide a public record of the event and promote the shared values and knowledge it has affirmed and revealed. It is for this reason the whole marriage ritual exchange between the bards is essentially a 'replaying', a re-enactment of the earlier private encounter. It is insufficient to have reached a bargain in secret; the process of arriving at concord must be acted out again, promises exchanged, new intimacy displayed publicly and ritually. In this respect the marriage dialogue may be related to that group of verbal contests in early society which take place in a guest-host

context, for example when feasting, numerous examples of which are found in heroic literature.⁴² Despite the presence of elements such as boasting, proud recitation of genealogy and mild insult, the contest thus less resembles a true agonistic encounter than a strategy for friendship bonding and incorporation. The same may be said for the various games, trials and racing which occur on the way to the church; these occur after the real trials have ended, when in reality the race for supremacy is already over. Although employing the mechanism of a bardic contest or popular game, the custom we have described is fundamentally a ritual of social relations.

c. The regulation of conflict

Another important function of the marriage dialogue is to express and subsequently resolve conflict. The ritual verbal form contains and articulates tension in such a way as to avoid the risk of physical confrontation and feud, the probable result of any direct expression of hostility. In order to preserve the systems of mutual aid which ensure communal prosperity and social cohesion, 'conscious models' designed to avoid, or to air and resolve conflict are commonly set in operation at times of potential crisis. The indirect, allegorical verbal forms achieve this, and we have previously noted the presence of non-verbal signals of refusal and acceptance. In a study of dispute regulation in a community in Ulster, Elliot Leyton notes that

disputes between non-kin escalate to group level... the villagers' clear awareness of the consequences for group relations of open disputes between non-kin serve to effectively limit the development of these disputes... greatest esteem is reserved for those who succeed in maintaining cordial relations with everyone in the village; and the greatest contempt... for those quarrelsome individuals who are frequently involved

in disputes.⁴³

Anthropological studies of dispute have confirmed that the use of third-party intermediaries is part of the same conscious effort to minimise the risks inherent in direct contact between, for example, the two fathers, or the groom and the bride's father.⁴⁴ In a study of dispute in 9th century Brittany, Wendy Davies observes that 'the drive to settle amicably was a forceful one... it was in most people's interest to establish and preserve harmony, especially in relationships within the *plebs*. It is only at higher - *supraplebs* - social level that there are suggestions of resistance to compromise'.⁴⁵ Of early modern Scotland, Keith M. Brown remarks that marriages were sometimes included in peace settlements, indicating society's belief in the institution's potential for dispute regulation. He also mentions the problem of finding arbitrators mutually acceptable to both sides, a difficulty Gaelic Scotland would appear to have solved with the mediating role passed on to the bards.⁴⁶ As ritual experts they resemble the Nuer 'men of the earth' described by Max Gluckman in *Custom and Conflict*: these arbitrators have no forceful powers of coercion but reserve the right to curse intransigent contemporaries; 'the ritual expert... is connected with the earth, in its general fertility, who therefore symbolizes the communal need for peace and the recognition of moral rights in the community of men'.⁴⁷

The many analogues presented in Chapter One illustrated the wide-ranging occurrence of ritualised dialogue performed with this specific intention. What we have seen is that the potential for disunion is managed by the structure of the ritual. The initial betrothal meeting takes place on a 'need to know' basis, perhaps in secrecy, perhaps even at night. As we have noted, the more public encounters described above appear to have

the purpose of deliberately providing a forum for the articulation and resolution of the inevitable tension which surrounds a marriage, as well as ensuring due witnessing of the agreements reached. This public re-enactment in contest form is ritually distanced from its social environment; the comparatively recent extended exchange from Harris may take place inside the bride's home, but the vast majority of other exchanges documented take place on less intimate, notionally neutral ground. Ritual dialogue between non-kin members enables the expression of rivalry and polarities of viewpoint in a way that monologic speech-making by relatives cannot. For this reason, such speech-making is reserved for the conclusion of the ritual, when such tension has dissipated.

In his study Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama, T.J. Scheff comments that

ritual management of ritual forms... produce two quite different effects; first the evocation of collectively repressed emotion and second a context which ensures optimal distancing of that distress, so that catharsis can occur... [this] is used to introduce... the 'mock' element in games, rituals and entertainment. [These] lead to the player's perception that the game is not ordinary reality but only a parody.⁴⁸

In having the tension of impending union expressed in the form of a 'mock' contest between poets, and being further distanced by having specific details articulated allegorically, the families and community can be both participants in and observers of their situation. As the bride and groom are usually hidden, veiled or silent they are, like the deceased at a funeral, simultaneously present and absent. This further promotes the abstracting of emotion by shifting the focus of the event to the wider group, creating social solidarity in the process.

The two families watch a contest which is essentially *about themselves* and their

change of circumstance. Those acting for them, however, the bards and outsiders, are markedly dissimilar from them, yet still articulate their situation. Not only are the two family groups physically distanced from the action, but they are ritually distanced through the allegorical speech and use of rhyme and metre which remind them that the contest is not everyday, not real, not 'of them'. How then does the contest serve the families? Although a bardic contest is a form in which they may never participate, the families may recognise in it an agonistic struggle for honour and position. As Scheff remarks, after Freud, 'dramatic scenes move audiences because they touch on repressed emotion... the scenes need not be exactly equivalent to the actual historical experiences of the audience — there are certain human experiences which are universal'.⁴⁹ The 'mock' contest achieves the controlled release of potentially volatile emotions; a real contest, such as a genuine flyting or a boxing match, would lack the requisite distancing effect, thus risking the breakdown of this control and leading to open dispute. Like early drama, the audience have foreknowledge of the outcome, and are aware of the social script. The bride's family know they will be defeated, but can expect to score a few points, demonstrating their worth; the groom's family will triumph, but are prepared for a series of setbacks. This leads to the moderation of the most distressing emotion, since 'by the time the event takes place, its effects have been softened by the prior discharge, so that the actual event is not overwhelming'.⁵⁰ Allegory, metaphor, punning and other verbal forms play a role in this; the juxtaposition of contradictory meanings brings an awareness of conflict to the fore, a conflict which is resolved in laughter. The audience is brought to the realisation that the formerly unrelated items are, after all, part of the same group. The poet uses language to

re-map the linguistic world just as the community is in a period of flux and re-defining itself. Marriage is understood as a union of opposites, therefore an opposition is set up and eventually resolved; in so doing the opposing parties are made 'equals'. The same conception may lie behind the use of riddle-exchange as part of marriage custom.

By refracting tension through a dramatic adaptation of a communally-recognised mechanism for dispute regulation (used, as we have seen, in other areas of conflict) a discharge of potentially damaging emotion can be effected. In addition, the communal laughter and carnivalesque lifting of inhibition promotes incorporation and union, the community revitalised in celebration, freed from daily reality, caught up in what Scheff terms 'pleasurable excitement and pleasurable reassurance'.⁵¹

This form of dispute regulation is not confined to the Celtic world, and brief mention may be made of two comparable traditions.

One example is the Greenland Inuit song contest, in which dispute between groups forced to share limited winter resources and land is channelled into inter-group and individual duels in song. The object is to defeat the other side with satire and derision. A limited amount of physical contact is allowed, but only that which complements the insults - nose-tweaking, for example, is permitted - and defeat followed when one side was reduced to silence. One commentator confirms the underlying purpose; 'by bringing inter-personal and inter-group antagonisms out into the open in this formalised way, more overt forms of hostility were avoided'.⁵²

The necessity of co-operation also lies behind the insult-contest between Basque shepherds, whose rota-system of sheep-watching relies upon the speedy resolution of

dispute. A call to make *xikito* (as we have mentioned, derived from the verb meaning 'to castrate') was issued when neighbouring shepherds judged that two of their comrades were likely to fight. The adversaries were required to stand at a considerable distance from one another and to take turns shouting rhymed insults 'until their anger was spent'. Opponents competed to recite or compose increasingly obscene and insulting rhymes as the contest progressed. It appears to have been effective; Sandra Ott observes, 'I know of no case in which *xikito* was followed by a quarrel or a fight'.⁵³ Interestingly, the tradition is also linked to the poets or *bertsolariak* who flyte with one another in the street and at festivals, as J.R. Jump describes:

At the entrance to the narrow street leading from the square, a large crowd has gathered. The people are looking up at two men facing each other from first-floor on opposite sides of the street. In turn, the two men are reciting short verses and at the end of each verse there is a ripple of laughter from the crowd... they carry a staff in one hand while they gesticulate with the other. Each *bersolari* starts by making a disguised reference to his opponent... cracking jokes at the other's expense. This is just the start of hostilities. As they warm to their task, each makes reference to the physical defects of the other. Soon ruder and more aggressive comments are being sung across the street. Insults and coarse language are employed. The two singers remain imperturbable in the face of the sung insults...they have the gift of words, the ability to compose rough verses on the spur of the moment.⁵⁴

In the 1930s each village had its *bertsolariak*. Rodney Gallop notes that they lived on public charity, carried news and gossip from one family and village to another 'composing poems of an infinite number of stanzas, and sang them to audiences'. Competitions could also take place on the *pelote* court, the contestants having been billed 'like boxers or cinema stars... it seemed hardly possible that the singers could really be improvising... yet their theme had only been announced to them a few moments before'. The retorts of one

eventually 'descended to a schoolboy's level of wit' and his opponent was declared the winner.⁵⁵

These descriptions are vivid, and in places strikingly consonant with accounts of the traditions on which this present study is based. It is interesting to note that the method for solving dispute among the shepherds on lonely hillsides has been adopted as mass entertainment by professional versifiers, perhaps in the same way that the Breton *disput* is now performed at festivals and, arguably, traditions such as the 'Dozens' and 'signifying' influenced Afro-American rap music featuring rival artists competing on a stage, and Jamaican 'toasting', where the same kind of verbal duel takes place. Many of these forms still exist; the present writer was involved in the production of a television programme which, in part, examined verbal art of this kind. To actually witness these encounters as living tradition was an unforgettable experience.⁵⁶

Notes

1. Trefor Owen, 'The Celebration of Candlemas in Wales' Folklore 84 (1973) 242. Quoting William Williams.
2. Owen 243.
3. Owen 243.
4. Owen 244-45.
5. Owen, Welsh Folk Customs 54.
6. Owen 249.
7. Owen 249.
8. Carmina Gadelica 579.
9. Carmina Gadelica ed. Moore (1994) 77-78.
10. Ronald Black, 'Beating the Skin,' West Highland Free Press Friday 1 January 1988.
11. Ronald Black, op. cit.
12. Owen, Welsh Folk Customs 52.
13. Gwyndaf 17.
14. Robin Gwyndaf, lecture notes, page 18.
15. Owen 250.
16. Owen 249.
17. Ronald Black article, 'Beating the Skin' op. cit.
18. Murdo Ewen MacDonald SA1996.97. Recorded by the author.
19. John MacInnes, 'MacMhuirich and The Old Woman from Harris,' Scottish Studies 10 (1966) 106. The tale describes how MacLeod of Harris hires an old woman whose task is to 'speak pretty cuttingly' to the bard MacMhuirich when he arrives to collect his dues. She flytes with him, loses, and the debt is paid. A related monologic version is told of

Bard Ceann Loch Iù who composes a satire to the bailiff who is coming to put the poet and his father out of their home (Rev. Norman MacDonald, recorded by Calum MacLean SA1953/21/B46).

20. John MacInnes, 'Gaelic Folksong,' in David Daiches, ed., The New Companion to Scottish Culture (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1993) 116.

21. For Welsh bardic contest see Ifor Williams, ed. The Poems of Taliesin Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968 xix; W.F. Skene The Four Ancient Books of Wales containing the Cymric Poems attributed to the Bards of the sixth century Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1868. II: 108-217.

22. Jacqueline Simpson, 'The *Weird Sisters Wandering*: Burlesque Witchery in Montgomerie's *Flyting*,' Folklore 106 (1995): 9. Presidential address given to the Folklore Society, 26 March 1994.

23. Guilcher, 'Culture Paysanne' 16.

24. Kelly Early Irish Law 137.

25. See, for example, entries in the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue under 'flyting': 'Fra the tyme that Elspet Cuming flet with him he hed nevir his helthe' (Elgin, 1613); 'his wyfe, having flittin with the said Helen, fell sicke' (Cupar, 1649): 504; see also A.A.M. Duncan, Scotland: The Making of a Kingdom (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1975) 335.

26. Jenny Rowland, 'Genres,' in Brinley and Roberts, eds., Early Welsh Poetry: Studies in the Book of Aneirin (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1988) 180.

27. Rowland 180.

28. See Patrick Malrieu, 'Kan-a-boz,' Dastum 5 (1978) 77-79.

29. Malrieu 78. Trans. NM.

30. Malrieu 78.

31. In his essay 'The Legacy of Flyting,' Kenneth Simpson identifies 'formulaic use of such features as... appearance, qualities, behaviour, ancestry, place of origin... poetic ability... animal epithets.' Studies in Scottish Literature 26 (1991): 506.

32. Kenneth Goldstein, 'The Verse Competition Jest in Northeastern Scotland,' JAF 83 (1970): 351-353.

33. Roger D. Abrahams, 'Playing the Dozens,' JAF 75 (1962): 211. For the related

traditions of 'joning', 'signifying' and 'woofing' see John W. Roberts, 'Jonong: An Afro-American Verbal Form in St Louis,' Journal of the Folklore Institute 19 (1982): 61-70.

34. Alan Dundes et al., 'The Strategy of Turkish Boys' Verbal Dueling Rhymes,' JAF 83 (1970): 326. Dundes notes that the tradition also exists in Greece and North Africa, concluding that 'The Dozens', as it is in form and content similar, has an African origin.

35. Dundes et al. 327.

36. Mark Glazer, 'On Verbal Dueling among Turkish Boys,' JAF 89 (1976) 88. Glazer adds the detail of the gestures to the description by Dundes et al., and notes that these verbal encounters frequently lead to fistfights, and may even take place between women.

37. Sandra Ott, The Circle of Mountains: A Basque Shepherding Community (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) 58-61. In 'The Legacy of Flyting' Kenneth Simpson details a poem by Ramsay 'An Elegie on Patie Birnie' informed by the flyting tradition which 'incorporates an attack on the Italian *castrati* tenors and a concomitant vaunting of... the manliness... of the Scots.' (507) Burns begins a letter in the form of a flyting 'Thou Eunuch of language - Thou Englishman...' (509).

38. See Nora K. and H.M. Chadwick, The Growth of Literature 3 vols. (Cambridge: CUP 1932, 1936, 1940) II: 576; Enid Welsford, The Fool: His Social and Literary History London: Faber and Faber, 1935, 65.

39. Simpson 505.

40. S.J. Connolly, 'Family, Love and Marriage: Some Evidence from the Early Eighteenth Century,' in Art Cosgrove, ed., Marriage in Ireland (Dublin: College Press, 1985): 279.

41. Deborah Gewertz, 'Debating among the Chambri,' The Journal of the Polynesian Society 86 no.3 (1977) 345.

42. There are many examples of flyting in epic tradition, typically involving members of different groups who are at war, or engaged in friendship bondings in a guest-host context, often during a feast. Examples of the first kind are Achilles-Agamemnon, Achilles-Hektor (*Iliad* I 101-307, XXII 247-375) among others, including Diomedes-Glaucos, Hektor-Patrokolos, Aineias-Achilles, Lykao-Achilles and Achilles-Asteropaios. For comparison, see, Beowulf-Unferth, Byrhtnoth-Viking messenger. For exchanges at feasting see eg Odysseus-Euryalos, Odysseus-Polyphemos, Beowulf-Unferth. Flyting could also occur in a council setting, for example Achilles-Agamemnon (*Iliad* I and IX), where Nestor and Odysseus try to intercede, and at the Althing, where Njal intercedes between Gunnar-Otkell and Gunnar-Geir the priest (*Njals Saga* 51 and 56).

43. Elliott Leyton, 'Conscious Models and Dispute Regulation in an Ulster Village,' Man I

(1966): 535, 541.

44. See, for example, Simon Roberts, 'The Study of Dispute: Anthropological Perspectives.' in Bossy, Disputes and Settlements 12; Jenny Wormald, 'The Blood Feud in Early Modern Scotland', Bossy, 113; Richard Kagan, 'Such Disagreement betwix Neighbours' in Bossy, 174.

45. Wendy Davies, 'Dispute in ninth-century Brittany' in Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre, eds., The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe (Cambridge: CUP, 1986) 72.

46. Keith M. Brown, Bloodfeud in Scotland 1573-1625 (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1986) 50, 58.

47. Max Gluckman, Custom and Conflict in Africa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973): 14-17.

48. T.J. Scheff, Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979) 130.

49. Scheff 151-2.

50. Scheff 163. Kenneth Simpson finds catharsis as one of the uses of literary flyting. 'The Legacy of Flyting' 511.

51. Scheff 151.

52. See Wanni Wiburwasdi Anderson, 'Song Duel of the Kobuk River Eskimo,' Folk 16-17 (1975-75): 73-81. Inge Kleivan, 'Song Duels in West Greenland - Joking Relationship and Avoidance,' Folk 13 (1971): 9-36. Quotation from Kleivan 9. Contests were generally on neutral ground, although 'surprise attacks' did occur; 'in 1743, 24 sledges arrived in Christianshåb from the South to upbraid its inhabitants in song, that they aped the Europeans.' (Kleivan 14). See also E.A. Hoebel, The Law of Primitive Man (New York: Atheneum, 1972) 93ff.

53. Ott 61.

54. J.R. Jump, Discovering Spain: The Basque Country (London: Harrap, 1976) 27.

55. Rodney Gallop, A Book of the Basques (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1971) 135. Further information on the *bertsolariak* may be found in Joseba Zulaika, Improvisational Basque Singing (Reno, U of Nevada P, 1993) and Basque Violence (1992) by the same author. See also Denis Laborde, 'L'art du bertsolari Basque,' Ethnologie Française 20 (1990): 308-318.

56. The programme *Seriously Funny*, an anthropological examination of humour and

joking relationships was written and presented by Howard Jacobson. (Wordfirst Productions/Channel Four, prod. Jenny de Yong). Broadcast April 1997.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

In her study Oral Poetry Ruth Finnegan criticises accounts which 'treat oral poetry as mere "texts" without reference to their social setting and significance', commenting that 'one can neither understand the organisation of literary activity in isolation from its social setting, nor grasp the functioning of the society without reference to the poetic activity which takes place among its members'.¹ With this in mind, much of the evidence presented has centred on the question of the function of ritual dialogue, notably with regard to conflict avoidance. It should immediately be admitted that the present writer's lack of facility in Celtic languages in any case precluded any excursion into textual analysis, and by extension into related fields such as the question of transmission. In examining the only extended transcript of a *rèiteach*, however, initial curiosity over the inclusion of a reference to the evil eye rapidly developed into what we believe is a strong case for the operation of this tradition as a sub-text to the demands for entry, the transference of ownership, the immutable nature of the agreement, the hiding of the bride, the anxiety over fertility and lactation, inter-community fears and jealousies, the use of praise as a verbal strategy and the physical examination of the girl. That such an apparently casual reference should, on closer analysis, reveal this wealth of information is but one illustration of the enormous sophistication and subtlety of the phenomenon. We have attempted to reveal as much as is practicable of the tradition in Gaelic Scotland, but freely admit that much may remain undiscovered and under-exploited in the texts and transcripts examined,

especially in the Breton and Welsh traditions. Comparative analysis has, however, revealed features common to these cultures which are indicative of the enormous complexity with which these societies integrated ritual speech and social organisation. Among these is the operation of ritual repetition, inversion, pre-figuring and re-playing mechanisms for the transfer of people and property. This has also led to the developing of a theory of one and two-way boundaries which has shed some light on the custom of ritual entry, extending to ritual beliefs surrounding conception, birth and death, and the house itself, in particular its penetrable boundaries, functioning as a cipher for the woman's body. We have also argued that on one level the ritual dialogue, through the thrust and counterthrust of the opponents, is representative of the sex-act itself.

The role of early law in structuring and informing the rituals has been shown to be of great importance. In particular we have noted the 'template' of ritual challenge and counter-challenge paralleled by spatial movement as evident in territorial law, the reclaiming of 'lost property' and the displacement of a household bard. Formal mechanisms may be seen as being adapted for use in the context of marriage, perhaps in a parodic or playful way. We have also noted, however, that such laws may have been open to abuse, and families coerced by the manipulation of these social norms. This would be especially likely in the case of an unannounced visit to ask for a girl, and we have seen evidence that this was not an uncommon occurrence. Laws governing hospitality, freedom of entry and movement also underpin the ritual structure, as well as customs associated with seasonal visiting rites. This has shed light on the activities of the itinerant bardic community as well as on concepts of spatial organisation.

A recurring feature has been the sense in which communities sought to build, in a deliberate way, a steady ritual progression which provided mounting 'insurance' that the process would be completed. This determination to ensure resolution, coupled with the implied fear of the consequences of non-completion of initiated ritual sequences, has been one of the more striking elements of the study. In particular, the development of a model showing a movement from indirect altercation between intermediaries and immediate family, through increasingly wider ritual participation, to eventual public performance strikes the present writer as remarkably sophisticated. Each stage is more and more inclusive, and before progressing to each successive level, there is a re-enactment of the conflicts raised and harmony achieved, the questions asked and consents given at the preceding ritual. As the ceremony progresses, failure to complete becomes increasingly unlikely as the entire community, including its dead, are called upon as witnesses. This indicates not only the enormous faith in the benefits of marriage for social harmony, and a recognition of a need to control and guard against the fickle humanity at the centre of the ceremony, but also in the power of language.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of the rituals we have described is the utilisation of a diverse range of ritual speech-types, each assigned a particular role in the ceremonial sequence. We have consistently been able to identify elements associated with the bardic order, such as threshold greetings, boasting, eulogy, blessings, and the ability to link up with the previous utterance. Importantly, more subtle features have been revealed such as the ritual preamble and the formulaic deference or avoidance in the giving of consent which have been seen in the majority of examples studied, and which are unlikely

to have been identified as ritual components without the benefits of a broad-based comparative approach.

Of great importance is the use of extended allegory, a highly flexible verbal strategy demanding a great deal of skill on the part of the speaker. To gain entry using the idiom of animal-trading or house-building is inventive; to then proceed to discuss not only the engagement but also the dowry in these terms is a feat of remarkable verbal ability. We have seen how the specific context could be woven into these dialogues; the curly hair of the family marrying in, the incompatibility of the incomer from the mainland, the girl's virginity. We also have proof from Brittany that this method of conducting a discussion, speaking of the situation yet denying absolute identification with it, was enough to preserve the groom's family from shame in the event of failure. On the face of things, this seems wholly incredible; after all the groom was present, and knew he had been refused. Everyone was aware that he had hired the matchmaker. Yet the community allows both him and his family to disclaim responsibility and blame the scapegoat for acting independently, or enables the young man to persist in the fiction that they had arrived in the middle of the night to discuss the weather. If we add this evidence to the elaborate non-verbal methods of refusal (even of a dancing partner) we may appreciate how fragile the community equilibrium was, or was perceived to be. Reliance on ritual verbal forms to preserve the peace indicates a powerful degree of faith in the ability of language to carry separate functional loads, to enable certain forms of discourse to occupy and take place in a distinct, parallel, ritual world, joined to, but one remove from everyday speech and reality. Like prayer, it is a dialogue which takes place elsewhere, rich in allusion and

metaphor, working on both conscious and subconscious levels. Little wonder that such language, occupying the space between the polarities either/or, is left to the priest-like ritual experts. The non-specialists, like the suitor, neither present nor absent, talked of nor ignored, look on. At the later 'fetching the bride' replaying of the betrothal meeting, the idiom of a bardic contest is adopted to allow a greater number of people to witness this event. It is truly multi-functional; achieving dissipation of hostility while engendering incorporation; utilising and integrating the wider community as witnesses to a quasi-legal undertaking, ensuring the words uttered are a matter of public record - and it is entertaining. This aspect of verbal art, according to Finnegan, is often overlooked:

Different effects can be accomplished by the poems and their performance: economic transactions (between audience and poet), expressions of hostility and consequent consolidation of contending groups, the transmission of religious forms or political viewpoints... but from the point of view of the audience, the central aim is surely enjoyment. This need not be categorised in reductive terms as 'mere entertainment'.¹²

We recall the vivid descriptions of up to eighty people in the room where a *rèiteach* took place, and the Bretons gathered in the street watching as two bards battled over the delivery of a dowry-chest. Much of the foregoing discussion has illuminated the deeply serious, even sacred nature and intent of much of the ritual content. The people's love of language, as well as their respect and, quite possibly, fear, emerges from our evidence. Sadly, none of the marriage ritual forms described in this study is known to have persisted much beyond 1945. The *rèiteach* revived in the 1970s may be seen as a poignant, lone attempt to resuscitate what many knew and appreciated as more than just an innocent diversion, but a practice which engendered pride in the language, and, in the context of a

marriage, asserted the continuance of a culture of great sophistication.³ Perhaps in a modern wedding we may see vestiges of a related tradition in the best man's speech: secular, risqué, faintly challenging, and the bride's father's: dignified, asserting stability. No evidence was found, however, for a comparable tradition even remotely suggestive of the multi-level, multi-referential ritual verbal art of Gaelic Scotland.

Some doubt exists over the genre of verbal art we have been examining, and on the available evidence this remains unresolved. With regard to the performance style of the dialogue between the two bards, Villemarqué is ambiguous. In his initial description the *bazvalan*, after getting off his horse, 'déclame à la porte... un chant improvisé'. He also provides a melody, which suggests that rather than being declaimed, the exchange was conducted in song. The dialogue is entirely in rhyming couplets, each bard contributing a verse consisting of anything from one to five couplets in length. By comparison, the dialogue song *Ann Arvel* (dowry chest) is more rigid, composed of two rhyming couplets per verse. It may be that the irregular form of the first exchange is consonant with Villemarqué's judgement that it was composed 'on an invariable theme that can be modified arbitrarily'.⁴ The *Ann Arvel* is much more satisfactory as a true 'song', and is indeed classed as a 'chanson' by Villemarqué. The dialogue between the bards would appear to have been rather decorous and stately - Villemarqué's comment on tempo is *religioso*, in keeping with his description of the event's dignified atmosphere.

Cambry states 'le dispute commence en vers de tradition' but he makes no suggestion of the *bazvalan* and his counterpart actually singing nor does he provide a melody, although his evidence derives from the same geographic region as Villemarqué.

The term he uses to describe the custom is 'disputes en vers', and he does not use the verb 'déclamer', rather 'le disputeur de la maison... dit en vers', which we may translate as 'recite'. Although he provides only a French prose translation, a fragment in Breton, outlining the poet's intention to robustly reject a non-virgin, is in rhyming couplets, which goes some way to confirming Villemarqué's rendering of the verse-form. He refers to the verses as being often 'original' and 'impromptu'.⁵ Brékilien, however, identifies the threshold, fetching and delivering the bride, and dowry ritual dialogues as being spoken. Since he is describing the tradition in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it may be that in earlier times chant or recitation, and possibly singing, were the modes of delivery. Other Breton commentators also refer only to a spoken tradition. Brékilien states firmly that the verses are learned by heart and 'not at all improvised'.⁶ Although on this slight evidence any comment on the development of the ritual performance is conjectural, it is worth recalling that the older Austrian *Gasslgehen* rhymes consisted of 'single four-line verses which the boy and the girl make use of according to the situation... improvisation or at least variation of the derivative material was common'.⁷ Later accounts describe the learning by heart of entire verses from elderly exponents. In addition, the tradition had changed from dialogic, with the girl's verse joining up with the one put forward by the boy, to wholly monologic, the boys competing to be in possession of the longest verse. In other words, the skill of improvisation had been replaced by the skill of memorisation. Given that both Cambry and Villemarqué assert the improvisational character of the tradition, while twentieth-century commentators describe it as learned, perhaps we have some indication that a similar change in structure and performance took place.

Since we are not dealing with a living tradition, and earlier commentators have paid little attention to such performance features as gesture, facial expression, audience reaction and many other aspects of performance which would assist this enquiry, perhaps the search for indications of a more archaic form, or arriving at any distinction between ordinary speech, chant, recitation and song is likely to be inconclusive. On this subject, however, Ruth Finnegan notes that 'spoken verse is probably less frequent, because the heightened delivery common in the performance of any sort of poetry already sets the diction somewhat apart from ordinary speech tones, so that one is constantly using terms like 'intoning'; and 'chanting' rather than 'speaking'.⁸

Of the Welsh threshold custom Trefor Owen observes that 'the verses were sung (or sometimes recited)'.⁹ Pennant refers to the tradition of 'singing alternately *pennylys*, or... extempore verses',¹⁰ and Alan Roderick to 'demands in the form of Welsh language rhymes to which the people inside replied'.¹¹ This appears to support the view that both forms of delivery were possible, although no traditional melodies are given by any Welsh commentator. The verse reproduced by Owen from 19th-century sources is metrically regular and consists of pairs of rhyming couplets. This conforms to Cambry's fragment, but is markedly different metrically from Villemarqué's Breton example. With regard to composition, Gwyndaf echoes Cambry's description in stating that 'the general substance of the argument and counter-argument is stereotyped, but within this framework personal variation finds expression', stress is laid on the ability 'to link up with the previous stanza... essential in an effective singer'.¹² Indeed, given that Owen describes one late 19th-century exchange as lasting 'several hours' it is unlikely that the performers had total reliance on

memorised material, although he speaks of the verses he gives being 'used' at a wedding of the same period.¹³ Again, the probability is that a typical contest consisted of a mixture of learned and improvised material.

A detailed analysis of Hogmanay rhymes from Gaelic Scotland may reveal the vestiges of a dialogic tradition consonant with those analagous forms we have described. The Breton commentators identified 'invariable' themes which characterised the exchanges, which were improvised on according to the skill of the performer. We take this to mean the 'lost animal' and 'transplantation' formulas, allegorical discussion of the girl and her female relatives and the attempts at entry and ritual resistance. All of these themes have been identified as being widespread throughout Gaelic Scotland. Similarities not only in generalities, but in specific details such as the working in of specifics from the immediate context, and the ability of bards to shift from one allegorical mode to another - portraying the women as birds, flowers and grains of wheat, the Harris men adopting sheep, hog, and flower, and clearly relishing the playful inventiveness of their performance - lead us to submit that the Harris exponents were in fact carrying on a tradition which was widespread throughout the Celtic world. The Harris exchange may have

lacked a threshold ritual, but in most other respects, in form as well as intention, it would have been recognisable to a 17th-century Breton, and arguably also to his Welsh counterpart. Indeed Villemarqué confidently links the ritual with the Middle Ages.¹⁴

For the present writer the enduring wonder held for this form of ritual speech lies in its multi-referential potential; the potential of the verbal messages to carry different

semantic values. Examples of these are the symbolic significance which lies behind the surface meaning, the way possibly sensitive information and conflicting emotion are conveyed with delicacy, artistry and playfulness. These coalesce into an entertaining art form which serves the families, the community and even the bards themselves. What emerges is the concept of unity; of the poets, of the families, of the couple, of the sexes, and of the culture, since such a virtuosic display reassures those gathered that custom is being followed, that the status quo will remain unaltered by the impending change in the role and circumstances of those at the centre of the ritual. The order of things in both nature and society is re-enacted and asserted, the hierarchy shown to be unchanged. The masters of ceremony are in their place, choreographers of social stability. The elaborate mechanisms for inclusiveness indicate an overwhelming desire to deny any fragmentation in the community, to submerge the human drama of marriage within an all-encompassing symbolic drama which adopts as its structure the spirit of conflict itself, dramatising the give and take of the relationship the community both desires and fears.

The present writer first encountered the tradition of the *rèiteach* in its revived form, in the article of this name by Morag MacLeod. It described a tradition which appeared to have no particular purpose other than as a diversion at an engagement party, an adjunct to the celebrations by both families. We submit that the *rèiteach* is in fact intimately related to the ritual and social organisation and *mores* elsewhere in the Celtic world, and shares many dimensions of its performance with diverse cultures outwith the accepted area of Celtic influence. The role of ritual speech in the Celtic world is an important and endlessly fascinating one, and one to which the current contribution is

offered as an illustration of the breadth and complexity of this neglected field of study.

Notes

1. Ruth Finnegan, Oral Poetry (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992) 245.
2. Finnegan 230.
3. I refer to Morag MacLeod's account of the *rèiteach* on Harris. Dr Margaret Bennett speaks of having attended 'a *rèiteach* of sorts' in 1988. (From Cradle to Grave 143).
4. 'La Demande en Mariage.' n.pag.
5. Cambry 402.
6. Brékilien 164.
7. Peter 105.
8. Finnegan 119.
9. Owen, Welsh Folk Customs 163.
10. Pennant 101-02.
11. Roderick 89.
12. Gwyndaf 18.
13. Owen, Welsh Folk Customs 163-66.
14. Notes to 'La Demande en Mariage.' n.page.

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